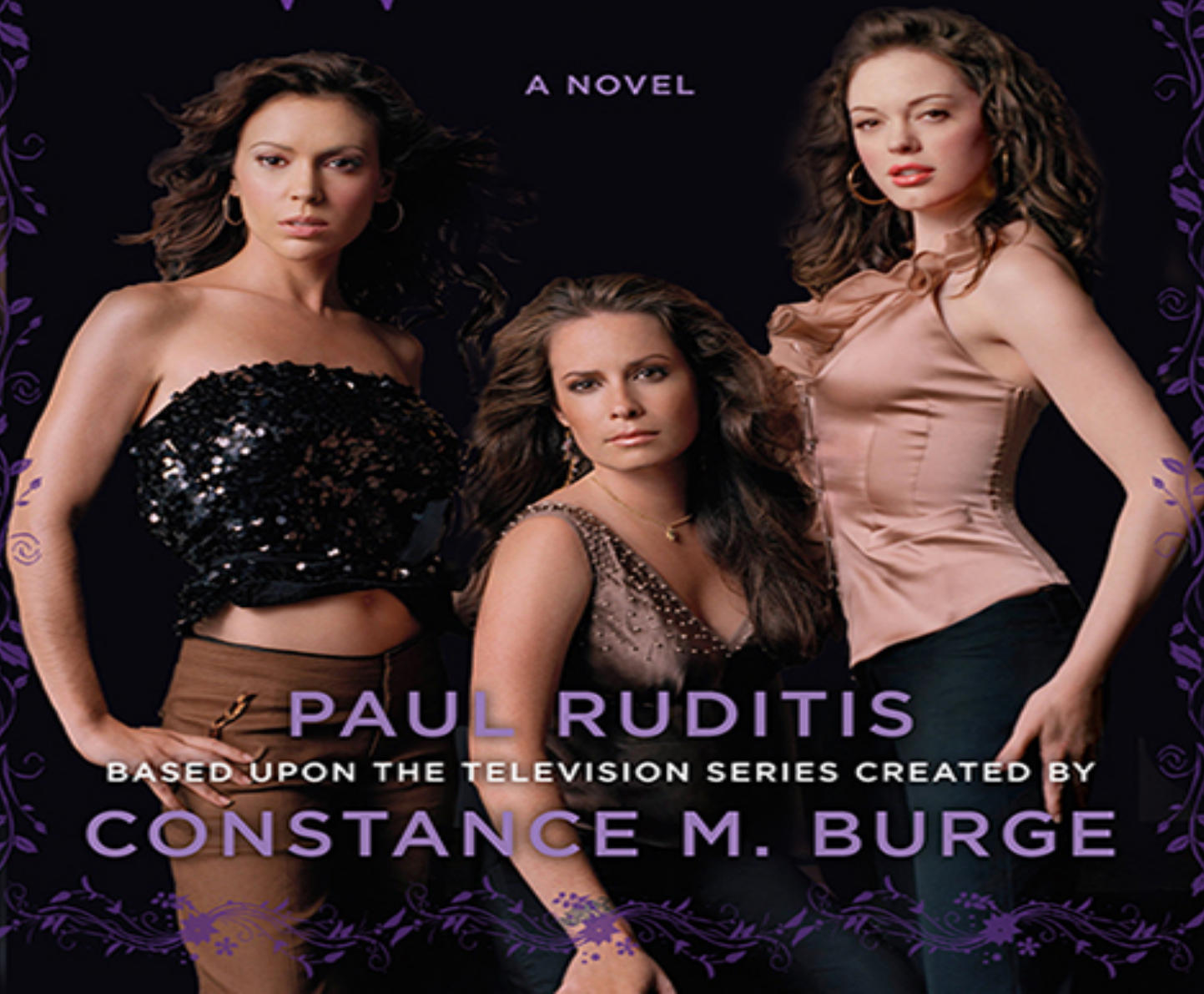
Charmed

The War on Witches

A NOVEL



PAUL RUDITIS

BASED UPON THE TELEVISION SERIES CREATED BY

CONSTANCE M. BURGE

THE WAR ON WITCHES

Paul Ruditis

Based upon the television series *Charmed*, created by Constance M. Burge

HarperCollins e-books

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Excerpt from *Let Gorgons Be Gorgons*

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CHAPTER 1

“No, no, not yet. A little higher. On the left. *My* left, not yours. Stop! Right there. Perfect!” Piper stepped back to take in the view. Bright sunlight streamed through the stained glass window, bathing the spot where she stood in a kaleidoscope of colors. It *was* perfect, as was everything else in the new house.

Scratch that. *Castle.* It was shaping up to be more like a castle. From the outside, at least. It was a floating castle in the sky.

The interior style was modern, with touches of the past. The great room was open and airy, without becoming cavernous. It was exactly the kind of place Piper could imagine her sister living out her life.

Living out her *life.* She smiled at the thought.

A short time ago, Piper had been standing in an exact replica of the Halliwell Manor, the house where she grew up and now the home where she raised her own children. Every feature of the Manor had been re-created in the most lovingly intimate detail, if a few years out of date. The master bedroom was no longer Piper’s in the doppelgänger Manor. It lacked some of the upgrades Leo had installed in the actual Manor after countless demon attacks. The children’s rooms still looked as they had when they belonged to Piper and Phoebe. But it was still home.

It was also depressing, considering the real Halliwell Manor—their *true* home—was half a world away. Staring at the familiar walls every day was a constant reminder of what had been lost. No matter how warm and inviting

this new living space could be, it was impossible to forget that it wasn't truly a home. It was, in effect, a prison.

Piper pushed those morbid thoughts from her mind as the de facto prisoner materialized through the stained glass. A bit of the fading sunlight came through with her, illuminating her now-blond hair. "I like it," Prue said as she floated to the ground.

Piper hugged her sister as soon as Prue's feet touched the rug. It felt so good to have Prue back in her arms. So *right.* Outwardly, Prue may not have looked the same as she did before her untimely death, but none of that mattered to Piper. This was *Prue.* It was Prue in her soul and in her heart. And Piper never wanted to let her go.

"I know you missed me," Prue said, her face buried in Piper's shoulder. "But can we cut it down to maybe a dozen hugs an hour?"

Piper clung tightly to her sister. "Fine. But the hugs are going to last longer in exchange."

"That's fair," Prue said as she gave an extra squeeze in return.

After the promised lengthier hug, Piper reluctantly let go. It wasn't like Prue had returned from the dead yesterday. She'd actually been back among the living for a while.

But this was the first time they'd had to really spend together without demons, Darklighters, or all sorts of supernatural problems getting in the way.

Prue waved her hand, and a brown leather couch grew out of the ground. "Nice," Piper said as they sat. She leaned back into the overstuffed cushions. "Comfy."

"I've been toying with different design styles," Prue said. "It was nice having this place look like the Manor at first, but I wanted something new."

The living room continued to take shape around them. The walls shifted in color, from shades of cream to coffee before moving into the green

family and finally settling on a muted gold. The rug adjusted to complement the walls before the room filled with more personal touches of decor.

Piper sat silently as her sister concentrated on the art and sculpture from different periods and places around the world that popped in and out of the room. It had been over a decade since Prue left Buckland's Auction House, but her memory for antiques was still impressive. Piper recognized several pieces her sister had worked with over the years. She doubted that the replicas had a single flaw that would distinguish them from the originals. Prue's ability to use magic to create the perfect home gave her an unlimited decorating budget. Her new role in the universe apparently allowed her to work around the whole personal-gain clause.

A couch, two more love seats, and a pair of recliners filled out the space, almost as an afterthought once the decorations were settled. Piper couldn't help but notice it was more than enough seating for their ever-growing family.

"Convenient that you can just change the environment here however you want," Piper said.

Prue's smile faltered, slightly. "Especially since I'm essentially trapped."

"We don't know that for sure."

"The Elders seemed pretty adamant," Prue said. "This is my fate. It's the tradeoff for being back in your life. Now that I'm the . . . the what? The Guardian of the Nexus of the All?"

"That's a mouthful," Piper said. "Let's just go with *Prue*."

The room stopped changing, settling into its final decor. "Call me what you want," Prue said. "It doesn't mean we know what I am. Or what I can do."

Piper took her sister's hands in hers. "I know exactly who you are. You're Prue. My sister. My very first food critic when you spit out that

chewy cake I made in that crappy toy oven. I might not have a restaurant today if you hadn't been so honest about my baking skills."

"I was a bit of a brat," Prue said.

"*Was?*" Piper smiled as she squeezed her sister's hands. "Okay, sure. You look a bit different now. And, yeah, you're not, technically, part of the Power of Three. But you're still a Warren Witch. You're still a Halliwell."

Prue pulled away. "Am I a witch? I mean it. I don't know what I am. I don't know *where* I am."

"Bah!" Piper shrugged her sister's concerns off in an exaggerated manner. Prue was right, of course. The uncertainty of the situation was a little scary. But Piper didn't see the point in focusing on that yet. "So you're stuck at the Nexus of the All. And, yeah, we don't know a lot about this magical convergence that links the Upper Regions with the Earth and the Underworld. It's not like it's the first time we've faced the unknown."

"Do you know you can't even plot this place on a map?" Prue said. "It keeps changing. Just when you think you know where it is—Surprise!—it's somewhere else."

"I can always find you," Piper said as she hopped off the couch and ran from the room.

"I'm not about to play a game of hide-and-seek," Prue called after her.

"Funny!" Piper shouted from the dining room. Prue hadn't gotten around to shifting that part of the Manor yet. She wanted to hold on to some of the memories just a bit longer, which Piper understood. So what if the place was mismatched and confusing as she went from room to room? This would still be the fastest renovation project Piper had ever lived through. And she'd been through a few of those.

Piper returned with the package that had suddenly orbed onto the dining room table while they were eating dinner. Piper had been having a hard

time keeping herself from smiling mischievously ever since, but she refused to tell Prue what it was about or let her open it—until the time was right.

Prue snatched the gift from Piper as soon as it was within arm's reach. "Guess the time is finally right."

"Well, no," Piper said. "I thought Paige was going to orb over along with it. Phoebe too. I wanted us all to be here when you opened it, but I can't wait. Their loss."

"What is it?" Prue asked.

"A housewarming present," she replied. "I think it will go with the new look perfectly." Piper could see some of the light had gone from Prue's eyes. It had been a long shot for Paige to make it over, but she could have at least orbed Phoebe in so Prue had more than one visitor. Piper was going to have to have a word with the newest star in the self-help-book world. *Finding Love* wasn't even out yet, but the advance reader copies had been getting such great early word of mouth that Phoebe's publisher had completely revamped the release plans.

"Piper, I can literally make this place into whatever I want it to become." Prue waved a hand and the coffee table changed from rectangular wood to a round fabric ottoman. "You don't have to spend any money."

"I promise, this is something you'd never come up with on your own. Not in a million years," she said. "Now, open it. Open! Open! Open!"

Prue laughed. Piper was acting like Phoebe did every Christmas morning when they'd been kids. Grams had always made the girls take turns as they opened each of their presents. On more than one occasion, both Prue and Piper took a little extra time with their gifts because they knew it drove Phoebe insane.

At the moment, Phoebe was driving Piper insane and she wasn't even in the room. That was the problem, of course. Trying to get Phoebe out to visit

was harder than getting the kids off to school in the morning. Piper was starting to consider putting her own sister in a time-out.

"Ta-da!" Piper said as Prue lifted the lid on the present.

"It's . . ." Prue examined the contents of the box. "What is it?"

"The kids made it!" Piper said as if it weren't painfully obvious. "Well, mostly Wyatt and Chris. But everyone else chipped in with their handprints. All eight of your nieces and nephews. They wanted to make something special for Aunt Prue."

"It's *special*, all right!"

"Prue!"

"Sorry! I'm still new to this auntie thing." Prue turned it upside down to get a better look. And then she examined it from the side. "But, seriously. What is it?"

Piper ripped the frame out of her sister's hands. "It's a painting!"

"That much I figured out." Prue pointed to the figure in the center. "Is that supposed to be me? With the dark hair?"

"Wyatt drew it. He used the old pictures of you we've been showing him since he was born. But he wants you to know he thinks you're just as beautiful with your blond hair now too."

Prue seemed genuinely touched. "I'll be sure to thank him for that the next time you bring him." Prue looked more closely at the painting. "Am I . . . in prison?"

"You really do suck at being an aunt."

"Clearly, my nephews and nieces have lacked artistic guidance while I was gone," Prue said. "But seriously, what's with the bars?"

"They're trees," Piper said.

"*Gray* trees?"

"Chris is experimenting with color," Piper said mock defensively. "Don't judge. Didn't you notice the leaves?"

“Is that what those are?”

Piper sighed. “They’re the handprints! The tree on the left is for Wyatt, Chris, and Melinda. The one on the right is Kat, Tam, and Henry Jr. And the one in the middle is P.J. and Parker. It’s a picture of you, surrounded by your family trees.”

The smile on Prue’s face faltered ever so slightly as she was overcome with emotion. “Oh, Piper, that really is beautiful.” She hugged her sister before grabbing the picture back to get a closer look. Her eyes welled with tears. “We should have a family party here so I can thank each of my nieces and nephews personally.”

“You *really* aren’t ready for that, Aunt Prue,” Piper said.

“I have the ability to control this place with my mind. I can clean up any mess they make.”

“Careful,” Piper warned. “We’re always on the lookout for a babysitter.”

“I’d be happy to volunteer,” Prue said. “I want to fill this place with your kids. I can make it as big as I need. A room for *everyone*. I’ve missed so much of their lives. Of your lives. But I’m back now. Just because I’m trapped here doesn’t mean I won’t enjoy every minute of this second chance I’ve got with my family.”

“You need to tone down the perky,” Piper said. “You’re starting to sound like Phoebe.”

“I could have taken a lesson or two from Phoebe,” Prue said. “Lived a little before I died. That’s it! We are going to have a party! A welcome-home party! Bring the whole family over. I’ll turn this place into a fun house for the kids. We’ll have a blast.”

“That would be great,” Piper said. “But . . . the whole family?”

“The *whole* family,” Prue said. “Nieces. Nephews. Husbands. Undead ex-boyfriends.”

“Dad?”

Prue’s excitement wilted. “Dad?”

“You have to see him eventually,” Piper said. “We told him you’re back. He’s beyond thrilled. And a little confused you never visited.”

“It’s not that easy, Piper.”

“Well, not now,” Piper said. “But before you were stuck here. You did have free rein on Earth for a bit.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“You worked through your problems with Dad,” Piper said. “You got past all that ages ago.”

“We did,” Prue agreed. “We got our closure. Became a family again. And then I died without the chance to really get to know him again as an adult. Now I don’t even look like myself. It’s just . . . hard.”

“But not impossible?” Piper asked.

“Not impossible,” Prue agreed. “But it’s something I need some time for.”

“Understood,” Piper said. “Until then, I’ll be here every day to make sure you’re getting back into the swing of things.”

“Spoken like a big sister.”

“I learned from the best.”

Piper ignored her sister’s less-hugging rule and wrapped Prue up in another bone-crushing squeeze. Prue was right. Coming back into their lives wasn’t going to be easy. It was especially difficult with her being trapped in this limbo between Earth, the Underworld, and the Heavens. But the Charmed Ones had faced bigger challenges in their lives. They’d saved the world on more than one occasion. Planning a family reunion wasn’t beyond their abilities.

CHAPTER 2

“Thanks for calling Halliwell’s. How—*ow*—may I help you?” Paige got her second paper cut of the day as she flipped open the reservations book. No one had told her restaurant work could be so dangerous, and she hadn’t even been anywhere near the knives. “Yes, we have an opening at eight tonight. Party of . . . *nineteen?* Actually, that, I’m not so sure. . . .”

Paige held the phone in the crook of her neck as she ran one finger down that night’s reservations page in search of an opening while sucking on the bleeding finger of her other hand and attempting the mental calculation of whether or not they could fit in a table of nineteen at eight o’clock. Piper hadn’t opened a little hole-in-the-wall restaurant, but it wasn’t exactly enormous either. Halliwell’s was already pretty popular before the *Chronicle* ran their glowing review. Now the phone was ringing off the hook even before they opened their doors for lunch. “We do look a little busy at eight, but how would you feel about the outside—”

“Paige, your presence is needed in the kitchen. Now.” Jackson, the petulant line cook, was suddenly beside Paige with his arms crossed and his ever-present scowl on his face.

Paige paused for a beat with her bleeding finger still in her mouth, blinked once, then turned her attention back to the phone. “Can you hold for one moment?” Paige didn’t wait for an answer before putting the call on mute and losing all the politeness from her voice. “Can’t you see I’m on the phone?”

Jackson let out a melodramatic sigh. “Chef refuses to double my shrimp order even though we ran out last night. I know I don’t need to tell you that —”

“No, you don’t,” Paige said, interrupting the line cook. She’d only been filling in at the restaurant for a week and had already had more than enough of him to last a lifetime. “As I was here last night and my ears are still ringing from your ranting.”

“But—”

“The chef is your boss,” Paige reminded him. “And when she’s not around, you report to Piper. Nowhere along the way do I fit into this equation. I’m just here to answer the phones, which I can’t do if you’re bothering me.”

“This is what I get for working for women,” Jackson mumbled loudly enough that there was no doubt he’d wanted to be heard.

Paige briefly considered orbing him to the moon. It was not the first time she’d considered teleporting Piper’s most annoying employee somewhere far away. The idea of breaking his body up into thousands of tiny balls of light and sending them out of her presence was tempting, but the thought of her sister returning to the restaurant to find a staff member missing always stopped her. To say nothing of the police investigation that would naturally follow.

She had to be extra cautious about these things, considering her husband was a parole officer and some of his best friends were the ones who would be forced to arrest her. Paige’s regular job already put Henry in enough awkward situations with his law enforcement friends. She didn’t need to add this temp work she was largely doing as a favor to the mix.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” Paige said. “As I know you will. But didn’t we only run out of shrimp at the end of the night? If I recall correctly, we only failed to fill one order of appetizers. Is that right?”

“It doesn’t matter—”

“Yes, actually, it does,” Paige said. “The amount of product we run out of most certainly matters—as I suspect most male business owners would tell you as well. And considering last night we had several tables of people who were still in town for last weekend’s shrimp festival it seems unlikely that we will have a run on the stuff tonight or ever again until this time next year. Either way, there is absolutely no need to *double* the order. Maybe you should politely take it up with your boss about requesting one additional batch or bushel or however you order shrimp.”

“Actually, they’re ordered in—”

“Don’t care.” Paige held up the receiver. “On the phone.”

As the line cook huffed off, Paige saw that Phoebe had come in behind him. Her less annoying sister—for the moment—was smiling as if she’d enjoyed the show.

Paige held up the finger that was no longer bleeding to indicate she would be a minute before picking up her own cell phone and bringing up the weather app. She returned to the call on the restaurant phone as she checked the forecast. “I’m so sorry about that. It does look like we can fit your party in tonight, but the only seating we have available is on the patio. Now, I’m looking at the weather report for tonight and it is looking beautiful. It should be nice and warm and the skies clear. Halliwell’s has a lovely view of the bay.” Paige closed out the app and put down her cell phone as she listened to the happy future patron on the line. “Perfect! See you then.”

Paige let out a groan as she hung up and went to make a notation in the reservations book. “Wait. Was that a table for eighteen at nine or a table for nineteen at eight?”

“Having fun?” Phoebe asked.

Paige marked down the table for nineteen at eight and hoped for the best. “You can cross restaurateur off my potential career list.”

Phoebe took a seat at the bar. “I thought you were full up on Whitelighter duties and helping at Magic School.”

“And the two days a week at Social Services,” Paige said as she moved behind the bar. “But the one thing those all have in common is their inability to cover the bills when you’re raising three kids. Parole officers only make so much. Add to that the renovations from when Tam accidentally torched the house with her new power. . . .”

“And the money Piper contributes while you cover for her probably helps.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m on the family-pay plan.” Paige opened a bottle of white wine and poured two glasses. “Which makes me feel worse since we’re already mooching off them by living at the Manor while the house is being brought back up to code. And here we thought it was just a little smoke damage.”

“You’ll be back home soon enough,” Phoebe replied, taking a sip of her wine. “And then it’ll be Kat’s turn to find a way to destroy something . . . with or without magic. I swear I don’t know how Piper managed.”

“And she only started out by giving birth to the twice-blessed one,” Paige said. “Whatever that meant.”

“Yeah, well, raising little half Cupids ain’t easy either,” Phoebe said. “P.J. had her first crush on a boy in daycare. We found out when she beamed him to the house for a playdate on Sunday. Coop had to rush him home before his parents realized he was gone and called the cops.”

“Starting a little young, isn’t she?”

“Who can say? Coop’s the first Cupid to marry a witch and have children. We’re in uncharted territory here. I never expected that P.J.’s witch half would unite with her Cupid half, even without a ring to activate her

power. I can't even imagine what will happen when Parker's power reveals itself, no matter how many times I try to force a premonition to give me a heads-up. At least one of us was smart enough to marry a normal guy with no magic."

"That has its own challenges when your daughters are witches and Whitelighters. Witchlighters?" Paige said. "I'm still not sure it was the right decision to bind their magic. Especially if they're growing up with cousins that still have access to theirs."

"Nothing saying you and Henry can't change your minds once the girls are old enough to understand consequences," Phoebe said. "For now, think of it as giving Henry Jr. the chance to grow up without having to defend himself from magical pranks. It's not going to be easy on him, being the only kid in the family without magic."

"Still less of a crapshoot than being in the foster system, I guess," Paige said. "And I say that as someone who works with the foster system. Let's hope things stay calm for a while. I can't handle any magical mischief on top of all the jobs I'm covering. Speaking of jobs, shouldn't you be at work right now?"

"I'm like two weeks ahead on my column," Phoebe said. "I stocked a bunch of articles since I was supposed to be on my book tour right now. Then it went and got postponed."

"Maybe it's a blessing. Take some time off to spend with your family."

"That's a good idea," Phoebe said. "The girls would love an impromptu trip to Disneyland. We save a lot on airfare with a husband that can beam us there."

Paige nodded slowly. The last thing she wanted to do was be a nag. At least one of the Halliwell sisters should be having fun with her family. But Phoebe's impromptu vacation would come with an obvious cost that Paige was somewhat surprised Phoebe hadn't already seen. "Yes, Disneyland

could be fun," Paige said. "*Or* you could pop over to the other side of the world and visit a certain sister who recently made a miraculous recovery from being dead."

Phoebe finished off her glass of wine looking anywhere but at Paige.

Paige took the empty glass out of Phoebe's hand and placed it on the bar. "Piper's wine glasses here are big, but not big enough to hide behind. Also? Clear glass."

Phoebe swirled her finger around the rim of the glass. "I don't want to take away from Piper's time with her. Growing up, it was always the two of them with me tagging along. I'd feel like a third wheel."

"Yeah, well, Piper could stand to spend a couple hours at her restaurant," Paige said. "I'm drowning in paperwork and personnel issues. Besides, I know that Prue would love it. She always asks about you when I pop in to get Piper's help with the latest crisis here or at home."

"Yeah, but Piper was always closer to Prue—"

"And you were a complete stranger who had no relationship with her whatsoever?" Paige finished her own glass of wine as she eyed her sister. It was long past time for them to talk about the former demonic elephant not in the room. "You're making excuses. We both know it has nothing to do with Prue."

Phoebe grabbed the bottle and poured herself a second glass. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know *exactly* what I'm talking about." Paige grabbed the bottle. It was way too early in the day for that kind of drinking. "Tall, dark, and undead."

"You say that like he's a zombie."

"Yeah, well, he's not exactly breathing," Paige said. "Look, I know I'm the last person in the world to extol the virtues of Cole Turner, but he's back

in our lives whether we want it or not. The Elders saw to it when they made him Prue's guy Friday. There has to be some method to their madness."

"There isn't usually," Phoebe said.

"I'll grant you that." Paige gave in and poured herself a second glass as well. Aside from it being early in the day, she probably shouldn't be drinking on the job, but what was the point of having a fully stocked wine cellar if one was not going to use it? "But the powers that be wouldn't go to the trouble of setting you up with Coop—something they've never done before—only to tempt you with your ex a few years down the line."

"Maybe that's exactly their plan," Phoebe said. "Maybe it's a test. Maybe they want me to be tempted."

"And maybe they just want to give Cole his shot at redemption, like they said," Paige replied. "Cole was always at his best when he was with you. Well, at least he tried to be. And don't think it's not killing me to admit it. Pretty sure no one on this planet has been a harsher critic of the guy than me."

"Okay, but—"

Paige's hand clenched her glass to the point of almost breaking as the sound of crashing pots and pans emerged from the kitchen. It sounded like half the metal contents of the shelves had come cascading down in there. Paige was afraid to find out the cause, but the screams that followed indicated that a person was more likely to blame than a loose screw. The loudest of those voices belonged to Jackson.

Paige looked back at her sister, grabbing her arm. "How about we pop in on them right now?"

Phoebe tried to pull away. "I thought you had a million things to do here?"

Paige held tight. "I'm taking a smoke break."

"You don't smoke."

“Fine, then an orb break.” Paige concentrated on her other sisters and felt her body begin to dematerialize. “I do orb.”

And she did.

CHAPTER 3

Natalie Yeung stared at the circle as it whirred on the computer screen. Round and round it went. When it would stop, she had no clue. While she waited, she mindlessly played with the magnetized name tag stuck to her shirt, pulling it apart and letting the magnet snap it back together through the fabric.

The tag read “Nat,” which was the name she went by, but that combined with her short hair and lack of physical endowments had more than one customer calling her “sir.” She usually shrugged it off, since there were worse things in the world to be called. Wasn’t like she was about to grow out her spiky, short hair and start wearing dresses, though picturing herself like that gave her a good laugh while she waited for the computer to do what it had to.

The laptop had a nasty bit of virus she wasn’t sure she’d be able to get out. Her job was so much easier when all she had to do was download a simple antivirus program and let it run. Halfway through the first attempt she realized she was going to have to attack this one manually. It was a much more complicated process, but it also cost more so the owner would be happy. She liked Roger and did whatever she could to help him keep the place open. It wasn’t easy, seeing how he wasn’t exactly a businessman, even by the most generous definition of the word.

Example one: Marci, the Tech Bytes assistant manager. She was a complete tool and a total waste of space. If any one person would be responsible for the end of Tech Bytes, it would be Marci. The fact that she

was supposed to be managing the store instead of off dealing with her girlfriend drama was just one example of her lack of professionalism. And leaving the store—and an employee—completely unsupervised was another pretty big example. Not that Nat needed the supervision. She knew what she was doing, even when the computers she worked on didn't.

The wheel stopped spinning. The virus was still there.

Nat smiled. She liked a challenge. Customers like this one that visited sketchy sites without bothering to protect their computers first were a joy as well as the bane of her existence. These people would keep Tech Bytes in business in spite of the bigger chain stores that also offered repairs. It helped that they were usually the same people too embarrassed to bring their computers in to the nice, shiny, big stores where employees could potentially judge them for what they found in their hard drives. The same dumpy little storefront vibe that held Tech Bytes back also helped attract a certain type of clientele. At least once a day Natalie got an eyeful of something she didn't want to see. A couple times she'd even had to call the cops.

The tinkle of a bell announced the arrival of a new customer, but the sound was drowned out by the music filtering through Nat's earbuds. She wasn't supposed to listen to her tunes out on the floor, but she also wasn't supposed to work on computers out there either. Her options were limited when Marci ditched, which happened with increasing regularity.

It didn't matter that Nat couldn't hear the door through the sounds of Tegan and Sara on her playlist. She could sense a new presence in the room. Maybe it was the shift in the air pressure when the door opened, or the shadow that fell on her as the stranger moved toward the counter. Or maybe it was the slight chill that she felt on her arms as he approached. That same chill had saved her from danger a few times before.

She pulled the earbuds from her ears and put a cautious smile on her face. “Welcome to Tech Bytes,” she said. “Where we take the bite out of your tech.”

The man stared at her silently.

She let out an awkward laugh. “Sorry. We’re supposed to say that. I don’t know what it means either.”

He continued to stare. It was getting uncomfortable. “Is that an ankh?” he asked.

“What?” She grabbed the neckline of her shirt. Her tattoo must be peeking out again. Usually when someone asked, she tugged it down a bit so they could get a better look. Something about this guy made her pull the fabric up. “Yeah. I know it’s like the most obvious tat, but I like what it represents.”

“Do you believe in eternal life?” the man asked.

Nat closed the laptop she was working on and slid it to the side. She wasn’t about to engage in a philosophical conversation with this guy. “Is there something I can help you with?”

His eyes flicked to her neck again before he placed his messenger bag on the counter. “I have something I want you to see.”

“Okay.” She kept the bright smile on her face, but braced herself for the unexpected. This guy was weird. That said, *weird* was par for the course working in tech customer service. Especially for a girl barely out of her teens. She’d dealt with plenty of weird before. She even liked weird at times, which anyone who’d met her last boyfriend would know. The chill she felt intensified, suggesting this wasn’t going to be her normal brand of weird.

The customer pulled an archaic book out of the bag. Brown leather and worn, it had to be at least a hundred years old. Probably more. It looked like it carried all sorts of dust and mites and microscopic junk with it. Nat

moved the laptop she'd been working on to the shelf beneath the counter. Last thing she wanted was to get any of that crap inside. "I'm sorry," she said. "I think you've got us confused. The rare bookstore is down the street." How he could have mixed a bookshop up with a store with computers lining the shelves and random wired and wireless accessories all around was beyond her comprehension.

He opened the cover of the book. "They wouldn't know what to do with a rare edition like this. They'd have no idea of its value."

"Well, I certainly don't have a clue." Nat looked out the window, wondering when the hell Marci would be back. Hopefully she and her girlfriend were breaking up and this would be the last time Nat was stuck in the store alone. *Ever.*

"Oh, I doubt that." His fingers traced the odd symbols drawn on the page in red ink. Her shiver intensified. "I suspect you have a lot of experience with books like these."

She glanced down at the pages as he flipped through them. Fear gripped her as she realized what he was suggesting. The strange man was wrong though: she didn't have any experience with books like that at all. But she had seen enough of them to know what it was . . . and she knew enough to want this guy gone.

"Look, sir, I've got computers to work on." She moved down the counter so she was closer to the door to the backroom. It was closed and she had to punch a code in to get through, but she could probably make it in the time it took him to get around the counter. *If* he tried to get around the counter. Maybe he was just there to talk and had a strange way of meeting people. She could have been blowing it all out of proportion. No one had ever guessed her secret before. This was uncharted territory.

The man was older than her, middle aged with hair graying at the temples. He was in pretty good shape. Nat had taken some self-defense

classes but she didn't think she could take him. Her cell phone was charging on the other side of the store, too far out of her reach. She should have just unplugged something from one of the outlets at the desk and put it there earlier, but she'd been trying to be a good employee. She wouldn't make that mistake again.

Nat took a step back as the man went through his bag again. "I can see why you might be confused," he said. "It certainly does look like a Book of Shadows. That's what you witches call them, right? Your little instruction manuals for evil?"

Nat laughed it off, but even she wasn't convinced by the sound. "Witches? I really don't know what you're talking about. We're nowhere near Halloween or April Fool's. Seriously, dude, I gotta ask you to go."

He ignored her as he continued digging through his bag. "Eye of newt, wing of bat," he said. "Blood of an Innocent. Isn't that right?"

Nat froze. Years of work in customer service taught her that there comes a time in every interaction when one realizes they're dealing with a higher level of crazy. Her eyes went to her cell phone again as she silently cursed Roger for getting rid of the store's landline. Of course Marci had taken the store cell phone with her in case their boss called. She was *so* going to get that woman fired over this.

Playing dumb wasn't working. It was time for a new tactic. "I don't mess with that stuff," Nat said. "It's dangerous. I don't want anything to do with it."

The man smiled like he'd won something more than just a confirmation of his suspicions. "Not now, maybe. But you will one day. All witches do."

Nat wasn't about to get into a debate over the role of witches in society. The guy looked enough like a professor that she suspected his argument would probably make sense. Tall and skinny in his bland tweed jacket, the guy seemed fairly harmless by outward appearance. It was the intensity of

his gaze that told her he wasn't going to be easily convinced that witches were a force for good, not evil.

"What's that?" she asked, panic creeping into her voice.

The man had pulled a small glass vial from his bag. The contents of the vial were green and sparkled when they caught the light. "Nothing to worry about," he said. "Just a few herbs. Goes along with this spell." He pointed to a page in the book, but Nat refused to take her eyes off him to look.

She took another step back. Nat didn't know a lot about herbs, but she couldn't think of any that naturally sparkled in the light. Her fingers reached behind her for the electronic lock, fumbling to find the punch pad so she could enter the code. "Spell? So . . . you're a witch?"

"No," he said. "Not a witch. Not a warlock. I'm just a man. And this isn't one of your Books of Shadows. It's something completely different. We call it a Book of Light." He took the stopper off the vial.

"*We?*" Nat's hand felt the pad as her eyes searched for accomplices. She saw a shadow outside the window, but couldn't make out a person. He was probably alone. The *we* was just for show.

Her fingers ran over the keys on the pad. The code was simple enough, but she'd never punched it in while the pad was behind her back and her hands were shaking frantically.

"Interesting." Nat struggled to keep him talking. "But what makes *your* spells good and witches' spells evil? Isn't it more about the person using them?"

The man poured some of the sparkling herbs into his hand as Nat hit the first number. "This is natural magic," he replied. "Unlike witches' unnatural magic."

Nat punched in the second number of the code while she tried to figure out a way to talk the guy out of doing whatever it was he was going to do. There was nothing more natural than the magic witches used. Nature was at

the heart of every spell. Somehow, she didn't think this line of reasoning would work on him. "By using natural sparkling herbs?" she asked.

"Don't worry," he said. "This won't hurt. And if you're being honest about not using your dark magic, then in the end it may give you exactly what you want."

Nat pressed the final number in the code and the door buzzed behind her. Her eyes went wide when she realized she'd entered it wrong. She'd missed a number or maybe hit them all wrong. The door wasn't opening.

The strange man smiled as the sound confirmed that she was trapped. He raised his open hand to his mouth.

With barely a thought, Nat leaned forward and blew the herbs into the man's face. He yelped in shock as the sparkling mixture went into his eyes.

Nat followed the herbs with his messenger bag, hitting him square in the face, spilling its contents all over the floor. She dove to the right, running out from behind the counter. If she could make it to the street she could scream for help until someone came. The store was at the slower end of the shopping district but there was usually a good amount of foot traffic. She just had to get to the door. Four bounding steps would get her to freedom.

A hand grabbed her shirt, yanking her back. The guy was deceptively strong. Nat lost her footing and went to the ground. The air was knocked from her as she landed on her back on the floor.

Nat swung her fists as the man straddled her. She wasn't going down easily. Her mind told her to keep moving. Fight back. Her fist connected with his head, sending him stumbling to the side. She pushed him off her, giving him a kick as she got to her feet.

Her attacker rolled back, between her and the door. She was on the wrong side of the counter, backed up to the wall. If she were a little taller, maybe she could hop the counter and make another play for the back room,

but the odds were against her five-foot-two frame. The attacker was getting up. She needed a weapon.

Lightweight tablets weren't going to do the damage. She'd slam a computer into his head if those weren't on the other side of the store. The tiny screwdriver she'd used to open the laptop would only be useful if he got her in his arms. She picked it up anyway, but hoped he wouldn't get close enough for her to use it. She needed something bigger.

The book!

Nat grabbed the old tome off the counter. The heavy, leather-bound book would do much more damage than a tablet.

"I hit the alarm," she lied, holding the book above her head, preparing to throw it. "The cops are on the way."

"I think we got off on the wrong foot," the man said. He also seemed to be taking in the situation. The half-empty bottle of mystery sparkling herbs was still in his hand. He'd closed it before the fight, but it was open again. "I'm here to help. To lead you back to the light."

"Thanks, but I like my dark little corner of the world right here." Nat flung the book at him, hoping it would knock him down or out or something, but he snagged it out of the air one handed.

"Thank you." He flipped the book open and began to read a language she did not recognize.

A glow emanated from the book and directed itself toward Nat. Either the light or her own fear kept her locked in place. Beyond the light, she thought she saw that shadow outside the window again. *Was* it an accomplice? Or maybe just some innocent bystander waiting for the bus? She cried out for help but the shadow didn't move. Maybe it was just a shadow.

The man stepped closer. "No one is here to help you."

Natalie was frozen in a prison of light. She wasn’t in pain. It merely held her in place. But she was terrified all the same as the man stepped closer.

He poured out another handful of the sparkling powder.

He lifted his hand to his lips.

And blew.

CHAPTER 4

Prue concentrated on the kids' painting as it floated up to the wall above the newly formed mantle. It really was the kind of artwork only a mother could love. Or a very, *very* caring aunt. Prue wanted more than anything to be that aunt, but she still felt a bit uncomfortable around her nieces and nephews. It was hard enough coming back to a sister she'd never known, but the tiny little humans that looked a bit like mini Pipers, Phoebes, and Paiges were another thing entirely. And there were so *many* of them. Her sisters had been quite busy in recent years.

It wasn't that Prue didn't like children. Quite the opposite. She'd always dreamed of a little Prue Jr. of her own. She'd never imagined that Phoebe would be the one naming her firstborn daughter that instead. Piper, sure, but Phoebe? *That* was how Prue finally realized how much her death had affected the family. When even Phoebe—the sister she'd nagged most of her life—wanted to carry on the tradition of names that began with *P* starting with Prue's, it was almost too much to bear.

It was hard enough to forge a connection with the little ones when she had free rein to visit as she pleased. Now it would be nearly impossible. Piper could joke about babysitting all she wanted, but it wasn't like Prue could drop everything and get to the Manor whenever the need arose.

Once the painting was hung, Prue adjusted the size of the mantle so that it balanced out the picture perfectly. She was still getting used to her new powers, but the ability to manipulate her environment was a decorator's

dream. It was a shame that Piper was the only one around to enjoy her work.

“What do you think?” Prue asked.

“It looks great,” Piper said. “But are you sure you want to put it in such a prominent place? I mean, we usually keep the kids’ stuff on the refrigerator.”

Prue joined her sister back on the couch. “I’d have to make a pretty big refrigerator for that picture. I like it there. Besides, I doubt I’ll be using this room for entertaining too often, so it’s not like any of my guests will be judging me for it.”

“What about your roommate?” Piper asked.

“Cole’s not my roommate,” Prue said. “He’s more like another inmate. One that gets to come and go as he pleases.”

“And he’s gone where?”

“I don’t know. I don’t keep track of him. Frankly, I’m glad that he’s not always underfoot. It’s not like we were best buddies back before we both died. We’re just getting accustomed to this situation. How about giving us some time to figure it out before we get the third degree?” Prue got up off the couch. She had to move.

“I’m just trying to help,” Piper said.

Prue smiled at her sister. “The curse of the middle child. Always the mediator. Always the fixer. I can’t imagine how hard my leaving was on you.”

Piper got off the couch as well, taking Prue’s hands in hers again. “It was hell on earth. But you’re back now, and I’m not letting go.” She wrapped her sister in her arms again. “More hugs!”

Prue returned the embrace, laughing, then squeezed a little tighter when she felt something shift inside her.

“What’s wrong?” Piper asked immediately. She was always in tune with her sister’s feelings.

Prue released Piper from their hug, but held on to her for support. “Something’s off. Something . . . happened.”

“What? Where?”

Prue closed her eyes and concentrated. “It’s not here. It’s not me. It’s . . . something.”

“Prue, the living room is moving.” Piper said, trying—and failing—to keep the worry from her voice.

Prue didn’t need to hear Piper’s voice to be concerned. This wasn’t anything she was doing. The Nexus was acting up. And that was not good.

This wasn’t the first time Prue had lived above a Spiritual Nexus. There weren’t many convergence points of energy on Earth, but they weren’t as rare as one might think. There was one under the Halliwell Manor—a point equidistant from the five Wiccan elements that had its own brand of magic. Many in the magical community considered that point a symbolic seat of power that could be swayed for good or evil.

The convergence point beneath the Manor was nothing compared to the Nexus of the All. “I’m connecting with the Nexus,” Prue said. “It’s trying to tell me something.”

“Could you get it to talk faster? The floor is undulating. I’ve got to . . . whoa!”

“Get on the couch,” Prue said.

“It just dropped through the floor!”

Prue hadn’t known about the All when she was alive, but every religion had stories about it, though it went by different names. The All was a spiritual energy that touched everything. It was the source of all magic, whether wielded by the good or the evil. It even controlled those beings that did not have access to their own magic. It was everywhere. And the Nexus

of the All was its source. It was the point where magic united the realms. At this place, anything was possible, and Prue was living right above it.

The Nexus of the All filled Prue's mind with images: a young woman, sparkling herbs, and an old, weathered book. Prue couldn't make sense of the visions, but she sensed the danger. She felt hollow in her soul. Empty.

"Prue!"

Her eyes popped open as the images flew from her mind. Piper was on the ground beside her. The living room was a shambles. The couch was gone. Cracks ran through the floor and walls. The kids' painting hung askew over the mantle. On her arm, Prue saw that her tattoos had shifted. This wasn't unusual, as the art on her arm changed all the time, somehow linked to the magic of the Nexus. A pentagram glowed in white on her wrist.

She pressed the pentagram, bringing order to the chaos. Suddenly, the images she'd seen made sense.

Prue helped Piper off the floor. "There's some kind of imbalance to the magic. It's in Connecticut. Hartford. A witch was attacked by . . . something. That part's still a jumble."

"A demon?"

"No . . . maybe. I can't tell. It felt . . . human. But something else. Something more."

"How do you know that?" Piper asked. "Hartford's on the other side of the world."

"I just know." Prue used the power she could control to bring the couch back up through the floor. "I guess it's another way that I'm tied to the Nexus. What it knows, I know. Well, this is just the gift that keeps on giving."

Piper cautiously took a seat on the returned couch. "And the Nexus had to nearly kill us in the process of passing along that information?"

“No,” Prue said. “That wasn’t the Nexus. I think it was me. I guess I kind of . . . lost control of the magic. It caught me off guard. I don’t know how to listen to it yet. How to take it in.”

Prue noticed Piper’s eyes flick to the painting. Of course her thoughts would go to her children. If this place could swallow couches whole, how much easier would it be to devour a child? So much for Auntie Prue getting babysitting duty now.

“You can feel something happening in Hartford?” Piper said instead.

“In that moment, I could feel everything happening everywhere,” Prue said. “I could feel the energy that runs through the entire world. I always can. Normally, I hardly notice. It’s in the background like white noise. But now . . . there was some kind of interruption. A break in the energy or something. It’s a little scary.”

“I’ll bet.”

“Probably something the Charmed Ones should check out,” Prue suggested.

“Speak of the devils,” Piper said as bright white-blue orbs began to gather in the living room.

“Careful,” Prue said. “You never know with us. The devil *could* appear.”

The tiny orbs continued to drop from nowhere as they formed the other two Charmed Ones and Prue’s third and fourth sisters. Prue never had the chance to know Paige while she was alive the first time, but she’d come to discover that the Power of Three couldn’t have fallen into more perfect hands. In order for that power to continue to grow, Prue had to relinquish her ties to magic that ran through the line of witches that had descended from her ancestor, Melinda Warren. It was the hardest decision she’d ever made in her lives, but it was also the most rewarding. She got another sister —another Warren Witch—in exchange.

Paige wrapped Prue in a hug the moment she'd completed the orb. "Look who I—"

"Chat later, fight evil now," Piper said, taking her sister by the hand.

Phoebe barely had enough time to check out the living room, but Prue could see the sudden glimpse of relief on her face. Prue couldn't be sure if it was due to the fact that Cole wasn't around or that they had to go as quickly as they'd arrived.

"Oh, are we leaving?" Phoebe asked. "Pity. Hi, Prue. Bye, Prue!"

"Nice to see you too," she said to Phoebe before holding her arm out to Paige. "Here. Place your finger on the tattoo. It should take you where you need to go."

Paige eyed the tattoo skeptically. "Your arm is a GPS device now?"

"Something like that," Prue said. "No time to explain. An Innocent is in danger."

Paige didn't ask another question. She placed a finger on the pentagram on Prue's arm, then looked up in her sister's eyes. She suddenly knew all that Prue had to tell her. Paige took Piper and Phoebe by the hands. "Thanks!"

Prue watched as her sisters' bodies broke up into thousands of tiny orbs again, rose into the air, and were sent off halfway around the world.

Flying far away from her.

Prue sighed. It was one of the few times Piper had left her since Prue had become trapped on the Nexus. She hated that she couldn't go with her sisters to help protect their Innocent. She missed her old role in the fight against evil, but—even though they'd only left a moment ago—she missed her family even more.

"The Cole I remember wasn't big on hiding," Prue eventually said. She didn't need any supernatural powers to tell her that she wasn't entirely alone. "Actually, scratch that. There was a certain amount of lurking going

on back then, if I recall correctly."

Cole entered the living room with his trademark smirk. "I wasn't hiding. I keep getting lost with the changing walls and floors in this place."

"One room. I've changed one room so far. But now that Piper's gone I don't have to hold back." She raised her arms. "But you should hold on to something."

Cole took a seat on the couch as Prue waved her arms like a conductor. She wasn't sure that the movement was necessary, but she was used to activating her magic through some sort of physical movement. Old habits died hard.

The rest of the building shifted from the Manor to a more modern castle. The interior of her new, magically created home was something out of *Architectural Digest,* the complete collection. It was everything she'd always dreamed of having in life, but she'd never had the finances to make it happen. But now that she could have it in the blink of an eye, it left her cold. Having all this stuff at her disposal wasn't nearly as rewarding if she could just whip it up with a wave of the arm.

Once she was done, Prue realized Cole was no longer sitting on the couch. He was outside on the newly formed balcony. Prue went out to join him and even she was surprised to see her new home was floating higher in the air. The sky above them was all pinks, yellows, and blues as the sun set over the desert.

"Someone took the idea of a home being a castle a bit too far," Cole said.

Prue batted her eyes at him innocently. "What? You don't like turrets? Turrets are awesome."

"Don't you think this place is a bit big for the two of us?" Cole asked. "I get that it wasn't your choice to have me move in here, but do you really need to keep a dozen rooms between us on multiple floors?"

Prue checked out what she could see of the exterior from the balcony. Maybe she had gone a little overboard, but there didn't seem to be any reason to hold back. "I have a big family. With a place like this, they'll always feel welcome."

"And they'll always feel like royalty," Cole said.

Prue gave him a playful swat on the arm. "Why are you complaining? Now you've got more places to hide. Where *have* you been today?"

Cole sat in one of the newly created chairs on the balcony to take in the rest of the sunset. "Just reading up on all the news that I missed while I was away."

"What a nice euphemism for *dead*," Prue said, with a little more harshness than she'd intended. "And don't act like you weren't keeping watch on the world while you were wherever it was you were. You know what's going on in the world. You're just avoiding my sisters. Or a certain sister in particular."

"I figured it's probably better that way," Cole said. "That particular sister is married now, a mother. She doesn't need me complicating her life."

Prue took the seat beside him. "Guess she doesn't need me complicating it either. I've seen Paige more than Phoebe since I've been back."

"She's another one that I'd like to avoid," Cole said. "I was never top of Paige's list before."

"Cole, that was another lifetime ago," Prue said. "Literally. They've moved on. *We've* moved on."

Cole coughed discreetly.

"Okay," Prue said. "Bad choice of words. But you know what I mean. If we're going to be in this together, we've got to be together. No more hiding."

"Fine," Cole said. "Did you want me to go after them and see if I can help?"

“They’ve been getting along fine without us for a while now. They’ll let us know when they need us.”

The pair sat in silence for a moment as the sun dipped below the horizon.

Cole leaned over to Prue. “You have any board games in this place?”

CHAPTER 5

Thousands of tiny orbs dropped through the air to form the bodies of the Charmed Ones in an empty alleyway in Hartford, Connecticut. Once again, Phoebe was impressed by the way that Paige's Whitelighter abilities exhibited themselves. The three of them could have popped up in a crowd or the middle of a busy street. One ill-placed orb in front of a bus could end the mission of the Charmed Ones and their lives. Thankfully, Prue's magic tattoo must have also taken that into account, placing them in a destination where they wouldn't freak anyone out or risk certain death.

"Are we here?" Phoebe asked. "Hartford?"

"We'll know in a second." Paige led them out of the alleyway onto a quaint little street in a mom-and-pop type of shopping district. All the signs were hand painted and the windows showed a wide range of items, from hardware to boutique-style clothing. "The vision I saw when I touched Prue's tattoo showed some kind of computer repair shop with a cutesy name."

"Tech Bytes?" Piper pointed to a sign a couple of doors down from the alley. Beneath the name, there was a crudely rendered painting of a laptop that looked like it was chomping on a row of numbers that were likely the address.

"That would be the place." Paige continued in the lead, moving down the street. She tried the door. A closed sign hung at an angle, even though the hours painted on the glass clearly indicated the shop should have been open. "It's locked."

Piper peered in the window. “Looks empty.”

Phoebe checked up and down the street. It was clear like the alley had been. Not a lot of people around, which wasn’t promising for a shopping district in the middle of the day. “Street’s empty too,” she said, pointedly.

Paige grabbed her sister’s hands and they were inside the shop in the blink of an eye. The store was empty, as it had appeared from the outside. The only sign of the fight that Prue had mentioned was some scattered papers on the floor. Otherwise, it would have just seemed like it was closed for business, if not for the voice whispering from behind the counter: “Come on, come on, come on. Pick up, pick up, *pick up.*”

Phoebe looked to her sisters. She recognized that whisper of fear they’d encountered so many times before. They were too late to protect their Innocent, but at least she was still alive. Phoebe called out, “Hello?”

The voice went silent.

Phoebe approached the counter slowly, careful not to spook the Innocent they’d been sent to help. She was probably already terrified by whatever had befallen her. “It’s okay. We’re not going to hurt you.”

A girl with dark, spiked hair and multiple piercings rose tentatively from behind the counter. Her clothes were torn, but Phoebe couldn’t be sure if it was the result of the attack or a fashion choice. The girl had a cell phone to her ear and a panicked expression in her eyes. She was trying hard to keep it together. “We’re closed,” she said. “That door was locked. I know it was. I just locked it.”

“No, it wasn’t,” Paige said. The Charmed Ones had gotten through so many locked doors over the years that they had long since tired of making up excuses to explain their sudden appearance. It was easier to just pretend the door was open. It’s not like most of the people they were coming to rescue were in a state to argue the point.

“I’m sorry, but I’ve got to ask you to leave,” the girl said. “We’ve had a . . . I don’t know what. I’m on the phone with the police right now. Well, I’m *on hold* with the police right now. I should have told them I was attacked with anthrax instead of fairy dust. But, you know, it sparkled. Anthrax doesn’t sparkle. At least, I don’t think that it does. It’s not like I have a lot of experience with this kind of thing. Does it? Sparkle, I mean. Anthrax?”

Babbling was another reaction the Charmed Ones had grown accustomed to after years in this line of work. It never got any easier hearing the terror in people’s voices.

Phoebe pulled a stool behind the counter and sat the girl down, noticing the name tag on her shirt in the process. “It’s okay, Nat. The door is locked now. You’re perfectly safe.”

Piper gently took the phone from the girl and disconnected the call. “The police won’t be able to do anything about this. Even if they do believe you. Which they won’t.”

“Besides, it probably wasn’t fairy dust,” Paige said. “Unless you were attacked by a person about six inches tall with wings.”

The girl looked confused, which was actually a good sign. “No. No wings. It was just a regular guy.”

“At least, he *looked* like a regular guy, you mean?” Paige asked.

“What do you mean? He was a guy. What else could he be?”

Paige chuckled, trying to bring some levity to the tension in the room. “That depends. He could have been a demon, warlock, sorcerer, seer. . . .”

Phoebe caught the girl eyeing her phone. Probably wanting to call the police again. “Okay, Paige. Don’t think you’re helping.”

“Sorry.”

“Who *are* you people?”

“Witches,” Piper said, carefully. “Like you.”

“I’m not a witch,” Nat quickly replied.

The Charmed Ones didn’t even bother to share a knowing glance. Most of the people they met with special abilities hid them from the world. This wasn’t the first person to flat-out deny what they were saying.

Phoebe took her hand. “Tell us what happened.”

Nat provided a quick rundown of her story between halting comments and questioning whether or not it was real or she’d imagined it. Her attacker did sound like some random guy. He had no horns, no fiery breath. But the Charmed Ones had also learned that even the most handsome man could be a monster inside, literally.

Phoebe and her sisters held their questions until the end with the unspoken agreement to let the girl tell her tale the way she needed to get it out. They wanted to get all the information they could get before they focused on the important stuff.

“This book,” Paige said gently, beginning the interrogation. “Did it have a name on the cover? Anything to identify it?”

“Not that I saw,” she replied. “But he called it a Book of Light. Said it was the opposite of a Book of Shadows. You . . . know what a Book of Shadows is?”

“We’re familiar with the concept,” Paige replied.

“The spell he chanted,” Piper said. “You’re sure you didn’t recognize the language?”

“Positive. I’ve never been outside of Hartford, but my parents and grandparents speak a bunch of different East Asian languages. I’m also majoring in film studies with an emphasis on foreign cinema. I like to joke that I’ve got an ear for tongues. This was nothing I’d ever heard before.”

“Did you feel anything when he used the herbs on you?” Paige asked. “Pain? Dizziness?”

“You mean before I blacked out?” she clarified.

Piper nodded.

“Just felt like I had to sneeze,” she replied. “Some of the fairy dust went up my nose. It smelled like oregano, actually. I could go for a pizza now.”

Phoebe was glad that Nat was managing to remain lighthearted. And that she had an appetite. It made the questioning easier on all of them. “Have you tried any magic since the guy left?”

Nat stiffened. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She sounded far from convincing. She had no problem talking about books or magic and fairy dust, but when it came to admitting the truth she still stuck to the lie. Years of hiding her abilities from the world and she still wouldn’t give up the denial.

Phoebe squeezed the girl’s hand reassuringly. She had not let go since Nat started her story. “This will be a lot easier if you trust us. I know we’re strangers and you’ve had a difficult day, but—”

“Let’s save some time.” Paige held her hand out. “Tablet!” Across the room a tablet computer started to glow a bright blue and white before breaking into tiny orbs that rose into the air and disappeared. The tablet reappeared a half a breath later, materializing in Paige’s hand. “See? Witches. Like you.”

Nat’s eyes went wide. “Wow. I’ve never seen a teleportation spell like that. What do you call it?”

“Sometimes I call it more trouble than it’s worth,” Paige replied. “I’m part Whitelight—know what? It’s not important. Let’s focus on you for the moment. What’s your active power?”

“I . . . I can sense trouble,” she replied, having given up all pretense of denying who she was.

“You see the future?” Phoebe asked.

“No,” she replied. “It’s more of a spidey-sense kind of thing. Not particularly useful as powers go, but it’s saved me from trouble on

occasion. It works better when there's supernatural danger around, which is why this guy was so confusing. I didn't get any kind of magical vibe from him, but he clearly used magic."

"So it's not just a warning power?" Piper clarified. "You're sensitive to magic all around?"

"Usually," Nat said. "But I'm not feeling anything now. I thought it was because you weren't a threat, but usually I can feel something. Would you say you're powerful witches?"

"Some people might," Paige replied.

Phoebe didn't like where this was going. If Nat couldn't feel the magic of the three most powerful witches the world had ever known, there wasn't much chance she was going to feel anything else. "What about spells?" Phoebe asked. "Do you know any basic magic?"

"Just a little party trick," Nat replied, the concern reappearing on her face. "Nothing special."

"Try it," Piper said.

"None of you have a quarter, do you?" she asked. "Any coin will do, but it works best with a quarter."

Paige reached into her pocket, pulled out a quarter, and handed it over. "I swear, if you pull this out of my ear or any other part of my body . . ."

"Not that kind of party trick." Nat seemed even more nervous as she stood the quarter on its edge on the counter. She held the coin down with a finger and gave it a flick. The quarter spun as she pulled her finger away. She leaned down so that she was at eye level with the spinning coin and whispered a spell. "Copper and nickel together make silver. But as it spins it changes color."

"Good to know there's someone less skilled at spell writing than we are," Paige mumbled softly. Phoebe elbowed her sister, gently, though she didn't disagree.

Four sets of eyes watched as the spinning coin danced across the counter, spinning slower and slower until it fell flat on its side. It was the exact same color it had been when Paige handed it over.

“That’s . . . not right,” Nat said. “It was supposed to keep spinning, changing colors the whole time. It makes a kind of colorful light show.”

“This is what I was afraid of,” Piper said. “Our other sister mentioned some sort of imbalance in the magic. I think he used a power-stripping potion on you.”

“I don’t know of any power-stripping herb mixtures,” Paige said. “Certainly nothing that can be applied topically. The potions I know about need to be drank . . . drunk. Which is it?”

“And to think, she works in education.” Phoebe tried to lighten the mood. It didn’t help.

“He took my powers?” Nat asked, panic rising. “You mean I’m not a witch anymore? I can’t do magic? At all?”

“Technically, you can still tap into the natural magic all around us,” Phoebe said. “Anyone can if they use the right combination of ingredients. But, no, you don’t have inherent magic at the moment. I’m sorry.”

“At the moment?” Nat asked. “So this can be reversed. I can get my magic back?”

The sisters looked at each other. The truth was they didn’t know. It was possible her powers were bound, not stripped. It could be a temporary spell or something that lasted her lifetime and beyond. They didn’t have enough information to answer.

Phoebe was the first to find her voice. “It’s hard to say. We need to know more about what he used on you. If only—” Phoebe stopped when she saw Paige suddenly drop to the ground.

“What are you doing?” Piper asked.

“Playing witch-scene investigator,” Paige replied. “Maybe there’s some remnants of the herbs on the floor.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Nat said. “The owner’s not big on carpet cleaning. Or vacuuming. Honestly, I don’t know why anyone brings their computers to us. This is not exactly a sterile environment.”

“Noted. Also, ewww.” Paige started to get up, but stopped short. “What’s this?”

“What’s what?” Phoebe asked.

Paige frog walked a few steps, careful not to touch the dirty floor any more than she had to. She pulled a small, rectangular card from beneath the counter. “Looks like a business card. ‘Jacob Perly. Media Consultant.’ Media consultant? That’s a new one. No business address, but there is an e-mail address.”

Piper took the card. “Anyone could have dropped this. She did say the owner never cleans. It’s not like most evildoers we encounter leave behind calling cards.”

Phoebe took the card. “But it’s nice when they do.”

“The guy’s messenger bag spilled on the floor,” Nat said. “I figured he cleaned it up while I was unconscious. Maybe he missed something.”

“Perly,” Phoebe read aloud. “This name is familiar.”

“Ex-boyfriend?” Paige asked.

“Funny,” Phoebe replied. “But *no.* It’s something else. Something . . . I’m not sure.”

Paige took the card back from her sister. “I’ll get Henry working on it.”

“What do you think he was?” Nat asked. “Warlock? Demon?”

“Too early to tell,” Paige replied. “First guess would be warlock because they’re all about taking witches’ powers, but I don’t know why he’d need a book. Beyond that, there are too many options, really. Could be

anything. We've got a lot of resources at our disposal. We should be able to tell you more soon."

"You're leaving?" Nat's knuckles went white as her hands clutched the edge of the counter. "Is it safe? Will he come back?"

Phoebe placed her own hands over Nat's reassuringly. "He got what he wanted. Now that you're powerless, there's no reason for him to return. You should be fine now."

"But if you have friends"—Paige went to the window—"a coven maybe? Surround yourself with people who can protect you."

"But warn them too," Piper added. "This guy—or whatever he is—might be after other witches."

Piper looked Nat directly in the eyes like she did when she was trying to calm one of her girls after a bad dream. "We'll find out who did this. And if there's a chance to get your abilities back, we'll find that too."

All heads turned as someone pounded on the door. The Charmed Ones took defensive positions, protecting Nat as they prepared to face the potential threat.

A woman in a black T-shirt and jeans had her face pressed against the glass. "Nat! What's going on in there? Why is the door locked?"

"Oh, great," Nat said as she went for the door. "My manager's back."

Phoebe grabbed her before she could open it. "Allow me," she said. "I have a few things I'd like to say to her. Someone needs a lesson on the responsibilities of management."

"This should be good," Piper said to her other sister.

Paige stared at Piper in disbelief. "Yeah. You and I need to have a similar conversation."

Following a few choice words from Phoebe, the Charmed Ones left the computer store the nonmagical way: through the now-unlocked door before heading back to the alley. The street was finally growing crowded with

shoppers as the day grew later. They had to find someplace with fewer prying eyes before they orbed away.

Phoebe had convinced the manager to let Nat have the rest of the day off and gave the woman no small amount of grief for abandoning her post and leaving her employee alone at the store. None of this was the manager's fault, of course, but it felt good to let some anger out. At the very least, the woman was a slacker too busy focusing on her personal life when she should have been working. The way Paige glared at Piper throughout Phoebe's rant, it seemed like that part of the conversation was lost on the restaurateur.

"You coming back to the Manor?" Paige pointedly asked Piper as they looked for a quiet spot from which they could disappear. "Or Halliwell's? I've got some questions—"

"They can wait," Piper said. "We've got to find out what happened to Nat. And if this man, or *whatever,* is planning another attack."

"We need to consult the Book of Shadows," Phoebe said.

"We need to use all our resources," Piper agreed. "You two go back home. Check in with Henry about that business card. But first, Paige, I need you to orb me back to Prue."

"Why?" Paige asked. "I mean, how do you think she can help?"

"I don't know." Piper shrugged. "But she's got access to mystical elements that we don't. She seems to be tuned in to the magic in all the realms. This is a great way to figure out what she can do and give her some purpose again."

Paige couldn't argue with that, as much as she wanted to. Prue could be a valuable resource for the Charmed Ones. They hadn't even touched the surface of her abilities now that she was at the convergence point of all magic.

Paige could have questioned why Piper had to be the one to go there, but there was no point asking. She still felt a little awkward around the sister she'd never known. Prue had been incredible to her since her return, even giving up her claim on the Power of Three so that Paige could continue the work she had started after Prue's death. But the thought of that only added to Paige's discomfort. How could she ever repay that kind of sacrifice?

If Paige thought Phoebe would go to see their sister, she'd have suggested it instead. Piper really did need to spend some time at her restaurant. And with her family. But Paige knew without saying anything how that suggestion would be received.

"Sounds like a plan," Phoebe agreed with Piper. "But drop me off at the Manor first, Paige. The Book of Shadows might be able to shed some light on these magical herbs that can steal magic from witches. Or this other book that went along with it. Besides, the Manor's on the way."

"When orbing, there's no such thing as 'on the way.'" Paige wasn't surprised by either of her sisters, but she at least wished Phoebe would make it less obvious that she was avoiding Prue's home. Or, specifically, the other person living there. Paige was a little worried about what that could mean.

"The Manor and the Nexus are on opposite sides of the world," Piper added, not so subtly.

"The world's still round, isn't it?" Phoebe said. "Therefore, everything is on the way to everything else."

"Fine," Paige said in a huff as she took both her sisters roughly by the arms and yanked them into the orb.

CHAPTER 6

“Power-stripping herbs? Power-removing herbs? Herbivores . . .” Phoebe mumbled to herself as she flipped through the familiar—and a few unfamiliar—pages of the Book of Shadows. She may have had a place of her own with her husband and the girls, but the Halliwell Manor would always be home and the attic, in particular, would be where she felt closest to her family and her magic.

This was the spot where Phoebe first learned that she and her sisters were witches. The secret had been kept from them their entire lives by their Grams, who raised Prue, Piper, and Phoebe as three normal, mortal girls following their mother’s death. Paige was the result of a previously unheard-of coupling between a witch and a Whitelighter. Not only were her powers bound, but she was given to a nun to be placed in a home without ties to magic so she would be safe. The secret was kept from everyone, including her sisters.

Phoebe understood that these decisions had been made for their safety, so she and her sisters could be raised free from the constant threat of demonic attack. She had decided to raise her own children with full access to the gifts that made them special. She wasn’t going to judge Paige for making the opposite decision, but she also couldn’t entirely understand it.

Yes, it was difficult when P.J. went through her clingy phase and kept beaming Phoebe back to the house when she had to get to work. Eventually, the half-witch, half-Cupid child learned the rules, though Phoebe still occasionally woke up in P.J.’s bedroom after being beamed there in the

midst of a nightmare. That was a mere annoyance compared to Paige's daughter nearly burning down the house with the family in it. It was hard to argue with Paige while comparing a mild inconvenience to accidental arson.

"Nothing in the potion books Piper keeps in the kitchen," Leo said as he entered the attic.

"Are you sure you checked them all?" Phoebe asked.

"My wife has an immaculate organizational system when it comes to the kitchen," Leo reminded Phoebe. "There's no way I'd miss anything."

"Yeah, but Paige has been staying here since Tam's little accident at the house," Phoebe reminded him in turn.

"I'll check the guest room." Leo spun on his heel and left. He'd been around the family long enough that he didn't need her to explain.

Leo might be mortal now and as bereft of magic as Paige's husband, but Phoebe didn't know anyone on Earth with more knowledge of the magical realm than Piper's husband. He'd been their earliest ally in the fight against evil and their strongest resource. Even when they couldn't count on the souls of their mother or Grams, Leo had been there to protect them. At times, Phoebe felt sorry for him that he no longer had access to the magic, but knowing that he wanted nothing more than to grow old with Piper while watching their children grow up made her feel better.

Phoebe couldn't find anything useful in the Book of Shadows. That wasn't unusual. The Book only contained information collected from the Warren line of witches over the centuries. If none of Melinda Warren's descendants had encountered a power-stripping herb potion, no one would have been able to write about it. Then again, it was always possible that they didn't think it was worthy to note in the book. If the Charmed Ones included every little magical encounter they had, the Book would have been hundreds of volumes long by now.

Phoebe took a step back and looked to the ceiling. In actuality, she was gazing beyond the ceiling, to a place far outside of her line of sight. “Okay, Grams. Any help you can provide would be greatly appreciated.”

Phoebe looked back down at the book and waited for the pages to flip. It occasionally happened when the Charmed Ones were at a loss for where to find help. Grams didn’t always solve their problems from the great beyond, but she did provide a ghostly hand from time to time. As the pages sat still in the Book, Phoebe figured that this was one of those times Grams wanted her to solve this issue on her own. Either that or she was possibly involved in some high-stakes poker game Up There against Eleanor Roosevelt and Joan of Arc. With Grams, one never could tell.

“Why is Leo rifling through Paige’s room?” Coop asked as he joined his wife. “Finally getting ready to kick them out?”

Phoebe laughed. “Please. Even if Piper and Leo ever felt like the Matthews-Mitchell clan was beginning to wear out their welcome they would never force them out on the street. They’re, like, the nicest people ever.”

“Maybe we could take them for a weekend or something,” Coop suggested. “If only our place was a little bigger.”

“Cupid pays about as well as Whitelighter,” Phoebe replied. “Which is not at all.”

Coop wrapped his wife in his strong arms. “I wish I could contribute more. Give you and the girls a life people dream of.”

“I have the life I dream of.” Phoebe relaxed into his body. It was true that Coop was all that she’d needed. It had been an arranged marriage in a way, when the Elders sent him there specifically for her as some kind of reward for putting up with their crap. Not that he was presented that way. It was one of the few times they’d manipulated things *for* the Charmed Ones instead of against them.

Normally, Phoebe would have rebelled against that. She wasn't big on setups. And she especially was not a fan of the Elders and what they thought was right for her. But Coop had been the exception. Their love had grown naturally in thousands of tiny, everyday ways. It wasn't just the lack of drama that was enticing—it was the way that every moment with him was dramatic on its own, without external influences trying to tear them apart.

Not that everything was perfect. Coop was immortal, or nearly so. He would live long beyond her death and the passing of their children. Growing old together was not going to be the same as she aged and he didn't. It wasn't something Phoebe liked to think about, especially since they had years down the line when they would have to actually deal with the reality of what that meant for them.

"You give us love," Phoebe said. "That's all we need. But if you had a line on this power-stripping herb concoction, that would be a help too."

"Sorry," Coop said. "Only potions I know are love potions. Those can be just as dangerous as anything the forces of darkness can come up with. What else do you have to work with?"

"The guy had some book with him," Phoebe said, stepping out of her husband's embrace. "Some kind of spell book or grimoire or something. Called it a Book of Light. We didn't get a good description."

"A lot of religious books are called Books of Light," Coop said.

"This one was light on religion and heavy on the magical mojo," Phoebe said. "But it's weird. The guy said it wasn't like our magic. That it was *natural* magic. According to Nat, he was very pointed about that."

"You can't get more natural than a witch's powers," Coop said. "It's, like, the most natural magic in existence."

"Tell me about it," Phoebe said.

"And the guy?"

“We think his name is Jacob Perly,” Phoebe said. “Paige is checking it out. There’s something familiar about the name to me. But I’ve never been to Hartford.”

“You answer letters from people all over the country,” Coop said. “Maybe he wrote you for advice. Or someone else with the same name. Perly isn’t common, but I doubt he’s the only one.”

“It’s not that. I feel like there’s a magical connection.”

“A demon you’ve crossed before? A warlock? Innocent? You’ve met a lot of people over the years.”

Phoebe stepped away from the Book of Shadows. It wasn’t going to provide her with the answers she needed. “I’ve got the name of every single demon and warlock seared into my mind. I couldn’t forget them if I tried. As for the Innocents, well, nothing the guy did would qualify as *innocent,* so I doubt it. But it’s ringing some kind of bell.”

“You’ll figure it out,” Coop said. “Just give it time.”

“Something tells me we don’t have a lot of that available,” Phoebe said. “I haven’t had any premonitions, but it feels like this is the beginning of something. Or maybe it’s the middle. This might not be the first attack. It’s just the first one that Prue sensed.”

“Prue?”

“She felt it. Or *something*,” Phoebe said, pacing the attic. “I’m not sure. It wasn’t a premonition. More like she experienced it as it happened. Piper was there—didn’t sound like it was fun.”

“You could have been there too,” Coop said. “I can watch the girls if you need to spend some time with Prue. It’s not like people return from the dead every day.”

“Around here they do,” Phoebe said.

“You *can* go if you want. I won’t get jealous.”

Phoebe stopped her pacing and took a breath. She worried that this was the conversation they'd been avoiding since Cole returned into their lives. "Cupids have some kind of resistance to jealousy?"

"No." Coop took her back into his arms. "But we have a close relationship with trust." He kissed her on the top of her head, which was easy, as she was considerably shorter than him. "I trust you. Believe it or not, I even trust Cole."

"Really?"

"He was allowed back on Earth to redeem his soul," Coop reminded her. "Do you think he'd jeopardize that just to steal you from me? What kind of future would you have if he damned himself to some demonic wasteland?"

"There hasn't always been a lot of logic in my past with Cole," Phoebe said. There had been a lot of emotion. A lot of passion. And a lot of hate. It was the most complicated relationship she'd ever had in her life and the most draining. She thought she'd moved past it—she *had* moved past it—but having Cole around again just reminded her of what could have been.

"Sometimes love isn't logical," Coop said. "It's usually at its best when you don't have to think about it. When it just *is.* Like us."

"That's not what I tell my readers," Phoebe said. "Relationships take work. They take thought."

"There's a difference between work and a challenge," Coop said. "We work on our relationship every day, but it's never a challenge. At least, not an insurmountable one. From what I know about you and Cole, you literally went to Hell and back together. That kind of passion is exciting, but it's not usually sustaining. We don't have that."

"You make us sound like an old, boring married couple."

Coop leaned in with her over the Book of Shadows. "We're standing beside a book of magic while trying to find an evil being that can strip

witches of their natural-born powers. Life with you, Phoebe Halliwell, is many things. Not one of them is ever boring. But we're lucky. Our love was blessed from above."

"Yeah, well, I never really cared so much for the people above doing the blessing," Phoebe said. "But I do love you." She turned and levitated several inches into the air until she was face to face with her overly tall husband and gave him a hearty kiss.

Piper had to lean back to see all the way up to the ceiling of the room. It was expansive. The walls were as high as the entire Manor and stretched almost as wide around. She was pretty sure Prue could fit their family home inside the room, if it weren't for all the books filling it. There were rows and rows of books on the walls, in shelving units on the floor, and covering every inch of space. One thing was certain: Prue might be trapped living at the Nexus, but she'd never lack for entertainment.

"I didn't know you had a library," Piper said.

"I didn't," Prue replied. "Until a short time ago."

Piper pulled a book from the nearest shelf. *Charlotte's Web.* She must be in the children's section. "Did you just make these? Did you teleport them from someplace? Can you create books that no longer exist in the real world? Pages from the Library of Alexandria? Could you bring the Book of Shadows here?"

Prue held up her hands. "Whoa, there. Not a fan of the rapid-fire questions. You sound like Phoebe."

Piper put *Charlotte's Web* back in its place, apologizing for the interrogation even though she had many more questions. She wanted to know if these books could exist outside the Nexus. If so, her kids would be the most well-read children in San Francisco.

“I’m pretty sure they’re copies,” Prue said, running a finger down the spine of a copy of *The Witch of Blackbird Pond.* “I don’t think anything here is real. And, no, I can’t teleport the Book of Shadows. I can’t duplicate it either. Some things are beyond my powers in this place.”

“Not much,” Piper said in awe. “How powerful are you, exactly?”

“I don’t know,” Prue said. “As long as I’m trapped here, I can make it bend to my will. I can make things appear and disappear. I don’t think those abilities exist outside the Nexus, but I’m working on it. The thing is, *I’m* not powerful at all. It’s this place, not me.”

“It would make it so much easier if you could just zap me here whenever I want to visit,” Piper said. “It’s annoying having to wait for Paige to be free to orb me over.”

“I’m working on some kind of portal,” Prue said. “Until then, I think I have enough power to set up a communication system.”

“So where do we start?” Cole asked as he came into the newly created room. “We could skim through these books for the next year and wouldn’t get past one wall.”

“I’ve got time,” Piper said. She didn’t catch the look that passed between Prue and Cole—the one that acknowledged that someone was starting to wear out her welcome.

It wasn’t that Prue didn’t love her sister. She would spend every minute of the day with Piper if she could. With Phoebe too. She’d love it if Phoebe would stop by more often. Even Paige, whom she’d only met recently, would be a welcome guest. But Piper had a family and a life on the other side of the world. Prue couldn’t help but feel like she was keeping Piper away from that life, away from her children.

It was possible that Prue was being overly sensitive. It wasn’t surprising that Piper wanted to spend time with her. But their father abandoned them

when they were kids. It took them years to get past it. She didn't want to be the reason Piper's kids were missing their mommy.

But this was a conversation for another time. An Innocent had her powers violently ripped from her. Maybe more Innocents were out there in need of protection. Besides, Prue really did like the company. She and Cole had hardly been close friends. It was still awkward having him around at times.

"We start by narrowing down what we need." Prue moved to the center of the room and raised her arms. "The odds are slim that a copy of the book you described is in here. Like I said, I don't seem to be able to duplicate actual books of magic. But one of the books *about* magic might point us in the right direction. So, let's start with the ones that describe books of magic. Nonfiction."

Prue felt her body rise from the ground as a dozen books floated out from the shelves surrounding her.

"He called it a Book of Light," Piper suggested. "It might have some religious implications. It might not."

"Got it," Prue said as more books emerged from the shelves.

"You can dismiss the ones that are actual religious texts," Cole said. "They wouldn't deal with magic. At least, not in the way we need them to."

Prue nodded as a few books slid back into place.

"And the ones that don't cover witches," Piper added as more books went back to their homes. "This attack seemed very specific. I don't think this guy is going after fairies or leprechauns."

This still left hundreds of books hovering in the air. They'd be researching for days, if not weeks. But Prue wasn't done. "Now let's cross-reference power stripping, witches, and Books of Light."

A few dozen more books floated back to the shelves. Great strides had been made with the Internet since Prue's death, but she'd found that it still

didn’t compare to the collected obscure wisdom found in ancient texts. If only she’d had this power during college! It would have made researching her papers for art history so much easier.

As Prue took in the books floating around the room, she noticed that they weren’t all above her. Books surrounded her at eye level and below her feet. She was no longer a few inches off the ground as she’d been when she started. She had risen almost all the way to the ceiling of the impossibly tall room. Dozens upon dozens of books hovered between her and the ground. Piper and Cole looked so small beneath her, but she could still see how wide their eyes were. So this is what it felt like when Phoebe floated into the air. It was kind of cool.

Prue gathered the books into stacks as she floated back to her sister and Cole. The stacks were still taller than each of them as they came down to the floor.

“It’s a start,” Prue said.

“Let’s get cracking,” Piper said, throwing more enthusiasm into the task than she usually did.

Prue and Cole shared another look. Piper’s enthusiasm would help them get through this monotonous task, but Prue was going to have to talk to her about it sooner or later. She needed to expend some of that same interest in her restaurant and her family.

Not necessarily in that order.

Alleys and bathroom stalls. Since Paige received her magical ability to teleport herself anywhere in the world, she had seen more alleyways and bathroom stalls than she had ever seen before in her life. It was only logical that the most convenient places to materialize out of thin air would be the last places anyone would want to hang out voluntarily.

Paige listened at the stall door to make sure she was alone. It seemed like the coast was clear, so she made her move. Out of habit, she went to wash her hands before exiting to the hall. She decided to continue the action, pumping out some soap and running the cool water through her fingers. She hadn't cleaned up properly since crawling around on the floor of the computer repair shop and it really had been kind of gross down there.

Once out in the hall, she worried less about people wondering how she had suddenly turned up at her husband's office without signing in and going through security below. The influx of security cameras inside and outside every building in San Francisco made orbing hard enough these days. She wasn't planning to go overboard, especially if she could make it in and out of the building before anyone besides Henry realized she was there.

Paige had to laugh when she stepped into Henry's office to find that he was the only one there. The extra precaution of orbing into a bathroom had been completely unnecessary. The smile on Henry's face when he saw her let Paige know she was a welcome distraction from his day. Henry got up to give her a kiss. "This is a nice surprise," he said. "Business or pleasure?"

"Little of both," she replied. "I could use a break from Halliwell's."

"And you figured a bit of demon vanquishing was the perfect way to rest?"

"Sometimes it's nice to blow things up," Paige said. "If only I had Piper's power to go along with her responsibilities. At least we'll be able to move home soon and be back in our own space."

Henry's smile tightened.

Paige did not like the look. "What?"

"What I'm about to tell you is ultimately a good thing," Henry said.

"If it were a good thing, you wouldn't have to prepare me for it in advance," Paige replied. "If it were really a good thing, I'd know that without being told."

“True,” Henry agreed. “It’s a crappy thing. But it’s good that we can get it taken care of now.”

“I need to sit down for this, don’t I?” Paige dropped into his guest chair without waiting for a reply. “Okay. Hit me. The contractor discovered our house was built on top of some kind of ancient burial ground.”

Henry sat in the guest chair beside her. “That wouldn’t be a problem. I’d know just the sisters to call to do a little ghostbusting.”

“Henry?”

“It’s asbestos,” he said. “In the attic. And the walls.”

Paige could not believe her ears. They were raising their children in a house built with a potentially toxic material. Was it in the bedrooms? How many nights had their kids slept in a house where the air was a potential hazard? Henry was right that it was better to know that information. But it certainly wasn’t good news by any stretch of the imagination.

“How long?” Paige asked.

“The removal and repairs should take another week,” Henry replied. “But since our house is already taking so much longer than the initial estimate, the crew is contracted for another job so it might take a bit longer for them to be available to start the project.”

“And we’ll have to stay with Piper and Leo while we wait,” Paige said.

“We could get a hotel room for a bit,” Henry suggested. “But with the cost of the repairs, I’m not sure we can swing it.”

“Oh, no,” Paige said. “Piper owes me at this point. In the meantime, we need to think about suing the home inspector we used when we bought the place. After this, the faulty wiring they found, and the rotted pipes, I have to wonder if the guy was really licensed to do the job.”

“Already looking into it,” Henry said. “And speaking of looking into things?”

For a moment, Paige had forgotten the reason she'd come to see her husband at work. Massive home repairs could easily distract from normal life. Or abnormal life, as the case may be.

"Someone's attacking witches," Paige said. "Or, just one witch so far. That's what I was hoping you could find out."

Paige gave him the details on the attack in Hartford, knowing it was a long shot that he'd be able to dig anything up for her. It was hard enough for the parole officer to use the city's official channels to identify supernatural crimes in San Francisco. Going outside the city limits called for even more favors. Across the country might be a few connections too far.

"I can try Inspector Clauson," Henry said, naming one of his coworkers. "He's got contacts on the East Coast. But it's easier if I can offer him something in return."

"Dinner at Halliwell's," Paige said as she got up. "Anything he wants on or off the menu. And full access to the wine cellar."

Henry stood as well, taking his wife into his arms. "Sounds like you're ready to give him Halliwell's right along with it."

"That would free up some of my time," Paige said.

"You know, we do have enough saved up for one night in a hotel," Henry suggested.

"I really don't see us crammed into a hotel room with the kids all that relaxing," Paige replied.

Henry gave her a kiss. "Who said anything about the kids?"

Paige smiled. "I like the way you think." Maybe it was time that Piper spent a night at home watching six kids while Paige was off who knew where. It was a tempting idea, but they'd never be able to slip away while someone was out there attacking witches.

They’d have to figure out the solution to this problem as quickly as possible.

Paige kissed her husband one last time before checking to make sure that they were still alone. With no prying eyes to see, Paige orbed off to continue her investigation.

CHAPTER 7

Austin still couldn't figure out what he was doing at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in the middle of the day. He was supposed to be in bioethics questioning the morality of the latest breakthroughs in scientific research. Professor Cahill was a notoriously harsh grader. Her tests were legendary at school, picking up on the most minute details from her lectures. No amount of borrowed notes could help the fact that missing a single class was tantamount to dropping one letter grade on an exam. And yet, here he was staring up at a painting of what appeared to be a woman crying over the body of her infant child. It was a morbid subject, and he suspected it wasn't an accident that they were standing in front of this particular piece of artwork.

"You're having second thoughts," the man beside him said.

Austin's hands squeezed the old book in his hands. "And third. And fourth."

"I understand. It's not an easy task that I ask of you."

"The job's easy enough, Isaac," Austin said. "Throw some glittery herbs on some poor, unsuspecting girl and chant some gobbledygook. What I don't get is—why?"

Isaac's dark eyes narrowed. "Austin, we have been over this—"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Avenge my parents' death. Get back what was stolen from me." Austin took his eyes off the painting and gave his companion a hard look. "I saw the girl you want me to do this to. She's not any older than me. She can't possibly be the witch that killed my parents unless she

slipped it in between snacks and naptime at her daycare. How do I even know my parents *were* witch hunters? I barely remember them. And you're the only one that seems to know that aspect of their lives. Mom-Mom just thinks they were accountants."

"Of course she wouldn't know," Isaac replied, brushing a hand through his long, black hair. "Nor should anyone on your mother's side of the family. Your parents accepted a calling that came down through your father's lineage. You are the last surviving member of that line."

"But how do I *know* that's true?" Austin asked. "Look, Isaac, you seem like a normal-enough guy for someone who believes in witches and magic and all that. And I appreciate you helping me out with school. I never could have gotten into college without you. But when I accepted that scholarship, I didn't know it came with supernatural strings attached."

The man placed a hand on Austin's shoulder. It was probably intended to be reassuring, but it felt creepy. "Austin, I assure you, there are no strings. If you want to leave the museum right now, I will not stop you. I only asked for your help because it was what I thought you wanted. When I read your stirring college essay about the questions you still have about your parents' deaths I knew immediately that it was meant to be. That I could give you the closure you sought. The fact that I, of all people, was in a position to read that letter and make the connection that brings you to this place of understanding . . . well, I couldn't *not* help, could I? I never imagined my work with the college and my scholarship program would ever put me together with someone like you."

Austin ignored the emotional manipulation and focused on the important part of his speech. "So I can leave?"

The man took the old book from Austin. "Absolutely. But I need you to make the decision now. I don't have much time for discussion. Other agents are on the move today. Jacob, with whom you spoke earlier, already

rendered a witch powerless. Emily will be moving on another more powerful witch after we are done here. We can't delay any longer, for fear that the witches will discover what we are up to and try to stop us. I have been planning this for years. It is time to act."

"So you've got someone else that could fill in for me?" Austin asked.

"Not in this city. And there's no time to redirect someone," he said. "I'm afraid this witch will have to be taken care of in another fashion."

Austin didn't like the sound of that. "What's that mean? Can't you just, like, fill in for me?"

"As I've explained, Austin, I've been touched directly by the evils of witchcraft. Unlike you, who were with your grandparents on the night your parents were attacked, I was with my family when the witches ripped them from me. I had to watch as they cruelly stole the lives of my wife and daughter. Their evil powers overwhelmed me and left me in a coma for days. I didn't even find out that my family was gone until after I awoke. A shadow of that magic remains attached to me forever. I cannot wield the Book of Light. Only a pure human can access its power. An Innocent, like you."

"Umm . . . I'm not exactly 'innocent,' per se."

"In this case, I mean someone untouched by magic," Isaac clarified.

"Okay, I get that," Austin said. "But what do you mean about taking care of the witch 'in another fashion'?"

Isaac pressed down on his jacket, revealing the outline of something in his inside pocket. It was a move Austin had only seen on television, but the guy was comfortable enough with it that it seemed he'd done it before in real life. It wasn't impossible to think that Isaac could have slipped a gun past the guards. Even with the metal detectors by the entrance, it wasn't like the museum had impenetrable security. The empty suits of armor in the Arms and Armor exhibit were more threatening than the former cops who

worked there, looking to spend their retirement in peace in the generally quiet museum.

“You’re going to kill her?” Austin glanced into the next room. The witch in question was about his age and didn’t seem like she could have killed anyone. She looked carefree sitting on the bench as she sketched the sculpture in front of her on her drawing pad. Maybe she was even a student at his own school. The university was renowned for its art department. She might have even taken the same train into the city that he did.

“At this point, there’s no other choice,” Isaac said. “The wheels are already in motion. If we leave even one of our targets with her magic, that may be enough to ensure our own doom. You have never witnessed a witch attack with her full powers. I hope you never do.”

“But—you’d really *kill* her?”

“It’s my only choice,” Isaac said. “Now that you’re hesitant to take her magic.”

Austin knew he was being manipulated, but he couldn’t take the risk that Isaac wouldn’t follow through on his threat. Austin found the intensity in Isaac’s eyes unsettling. If there was any chance of saving this girl, it was by doing what Austin had been brought there to do.

It wasn’t like he’d be hurting her. Isaac had promised that she wouldn’t feel a thing. All Austin was going to do was take away her dark magic. She’d be normal, like everybody else. If anything, he could be helping her live a full life outside of evil influences. Maybe she’d never even used her witchcraft and wouldn’t miss it.

Austin took the old book back from Isaac with renewed interest. He could do this, in spite of the smirk on Isaac’s face that made Austin feel dirty and maybe a little evil himself. He had to put those thoughts aside. If what he did could save her life, then it was worth the effort. It wasn’t much of a justification, but it would have to do.

“I’ll be watching from here,” Isaac said. “Making sure no one enters. You should move now while the room is empty but for her.”

“What about the video cameras?”

“Do it right and it will appear as nothing more than two people having a conversation,” Isaac said. “Do it wrong, and it isn’t like she’d be able to explain what you were trying to do anyway.”

They weren’t exactly words of comfort, but Isaac was right. Museum security was keeping an eye out for potential theft of artwork, not magic. With a sigh, Austin clutched the book to his chest and made his move.

The room the witch sat in was large and open with several modern sculptures peppered throughout. Large windows carried enough light into the room to make it bright and warm. He was just another guy strolling through the museum. This would have been harder in the dimly lit Egyptian exhibit, where it was harder to see. Then again, that would be better to protect his identity if anything went wrong.

Austin moved past the twisted metal of some kind of display that looked like a deformed dinosaur skeleton. He’d never been into art and didn’t get what was all that interesting about the metal twisted into weird shapes and geometric designs. It was nice and all, but he didn’t understand what set it apart as special or how it deserved to be in a museum when he saw similar stuff at the mall. The witch was clearly engrossed by it though.

She’d conveniently chosen to set up her sketchpad in one of the less popular exhibits. Still, Austin knew he didn’t have much time. All he needed was one tour group to turn a corner and there would be dozens of witnesses. Trying to explain what he was doing on a video recording would be a lot easier than to a room full of freaked-out people.

“Beautiful,” he said, glancing at her sketchpad.

“Excuse me?” The witch immediately tensed. Austin had to wonder if all witches had their guards up like that. Or maybe she thought he was

trying to pick her up.

"Your sketch," he quickly replied. "It really captures the . . . thing."

"The *thing?*"

"Sculpture!" This was not going well. "I'm sorry. I'm not that into art. I'm only here for an assignment. I don't know what I'm supposed to be looking at. But you seem to get it. That's nice work."

The witch closed her sketchbook. "Look, I don't have the time for some guy who read in a book that museums are a good place to meet women. I've got an assignment of my own to finish. For a class that's a bitch to pass, not some cake class you thought you'd take to up your GPA."

Nope. Not going well at all.

Austin laughed lightly, trying to play it off as he held up the Book of Light. "Seriously? You think this book tells me how to pick up women?"

She still looked skeptical. "The library is across the street. Big stone building. Lots of columns."

"Yes, I know," he replied. "This isn't a library book. It's something . . . well, something you might be interested in."

"If you think you sound less skeevy, you're wrong."

Austin sat at the other end of the bench, keeping a safe distance so he didn't scare her off. "No, no," he said as he opened the book. Better to just get this over with. He wasn't sure how long he'd be able to keep her there. "Nothing skeevy. It's just . . . words on a page."

"What are you even talking about?" she asked, her guard still up. She reached into her pocket and Austin feared that she was about to pull out a can of mace.

Austin discreetly slipped a bottle out of his own jacket pocket. "I'm sorry. I think we got off on the wrong foot. Maybe I should just save time and tell you the truth. My name is Austin. And I know you're a witch."

"I don't—"

“You can deny it all you want, but we really don’t have time,” he said. “I’m not here alone. There’s this guy . . . and he knows about you too. Thing is, he wants to hurt you. Maybe even kill you.” He uncorked the bottle with his thumb. “I can stop him if you just let me. I can protect you. All you have to do is—”

“Security!”

Austin put the cap back on the bottle. “No! No! It’s okay.”

He tried to put a calming hand on her arm. It was a mistake.

The girl slapped him away. The bottle flew from his fingers and slid across the floor.

“Security!” she yelled again.

“No. Seriously!” he said, getting up. “It’s all okay.”

Austin wasn’t looking at her anymore. His eyes were focused on Isaac, who was moving into the room. His head was down, his hand reaching into his jacket.

Then Austin saw the kids behind Isaac. A tour group that must have been a class trip had just rounded the corner. It was worse than he’d feared. Over two dozen kids, a teacher, chaperones, and a tour guide were about to get in the mix. And Isaac’s arm was coming out of his jacket, holding a gun.

“No!” Austin went for Isaac, pushing his hand away.

The gun went off as it was aimed at the floor.

The witch ran from the room as kids screamed and alarms blared.

Isaac grabbed Austin. “We need to move. Now.”

Austin followed Isaac, clutching the book. There wasn’t time to retrieve the bottle of herbs, the bottle covered with his fingerprints. All he could think as he ran was that he was so screwed.

CHAPTER 8

Prue slammed the book she was holding down on the table. “We’ve been at this for two hours and nothing! This was a mistake.”

“No!” Piper said. “We’re making progress. Look at all these books we’ve counted out.” The pile she’d been going through was barely half her size now and there were still a dozen stacks around her. Prue almost had to laugh at Piper’s forced positivity. She was usually the realist, not the optimist. That was Phoebe.

“We’re wasting time,” Prue said. “I’ve always been better out in the field. I’m not the research-librarian type.”

Cole closed the book he’d been reading. “I agree with Prue. I don’t think the answer to this one is going to be found in a book. At least, not these books.”

“What are you suggesting?” Prue asked.

Cole pushed back his chair and got up. “If there *is* a book out there with spells that can debilitate witches, that can’t be something that just popped up on the scene. Someone must have heard of it before this. That kind of power would be sought after throughout the demon community.”

“No, Cole,” Prue said. She knew exactly where this was going. Now it was time for her to share a knowing look with Piper.

“All I have to do is—”

Piper jumped in. “Prue’s right, Cole. The Elders left you here to help Prue so that you can finally prove you’re worthy of moving on . . . of

resting in peace. How are you going to do that if you reconnect with your old demon contacts?"

"What good am I to anyone if I don't use the skills I possess?" Cole asked. "Evil isn't a drug. I'm not an addict."

"That's not even close to true and you know it," Prue said. "Evil *is* a drug. You might not have a demon inside of you any longer, but you can't say that you haven't been infected by evil without Belthazor around. I'm not letting you near the temptation."

"Then we have three of our best resources trapped here going nowhere," Cole pointed out. "How is that working for anyone?"

Silence echoed through the cavernous room.

"Cole's right," Piper finally said.

Prue was thunderstruck. "Piper!"

"Not about his demon contacts," she quickly added. "Sorry, Cole, it's too big a risk. But we are wasting our resources here. We keep acting like we're the same people as before. That this can work like it used to. Why are we looking in books when Prue can access a magic that is unlike anything we've ever witnessed? Why don't we figure out what this Nexus can really do?"

"What do you have in mind?" Prue asked.

"You tell me," Piper said. "You're the one that gets mysterious messages on her arm. What's it telling you now?"

All three of them looked down at Prue's skin. The pentagram that had formed there earlier was gone. In its place was a collection of symbols that meant nothing to any of them. More often than not, that's what she faced every day: random meaninglessness that wouldn't wash off no matter how hard she scrubbed.

"We're not off to a good start here," Prue said.

"You know what you need?" Piper asked. "An attic."

“I got rid of the attic just before you came back,” Prue reminded her.

“Not a literal attic,” Piper said. “A figurative one. Someplace here that is specifically designed for magic. We’ve got the attic back home and I’ve got my kitchen. What you need is separate space to commune with the Nexus. Something like a supernatural home office.”

“This entire place communes with the Nexus,” Prue reminded her. “It *is* the Nexus.”

“Piper’s right,” Cole said. “You need an altar or something equivalent. A place that is specifically for you to use magic so the rest of this place can be your home.”

“Like I can shut a door and forget where I am?” Prue scoffed. “Don’t think that’s happening anytime soon.”

“We get it, Prue,” Piper said. “You’ll never forget where you are. But you can’t keep wallowing. It’s time to suck it up and deal.”

“*There’s* the Piper I remember,” Prue said, getting up from her chair. “Fine. Let me try something. You might want to get up too, Piper.”

Prue closed her eyes once she saw that Piper had followed her instructions. The last thing she wanted to do was drop her sister onto the floor.

Even with her eyes closed, Prue could sense the books on the floor around them disappearing. The walls began to spin, slowly at first, then faster, until those books became a blur of color. The immense room they were in was shrinking, growing closer and closer to them as it spun.

“Uh, Prue?” Piper stepped closer to her sister.

“It’s okay,” Prue replied with her eyes still shut. “I got this.”

The walls continued closing in on them and the ceiling still dropped. Prue could see it all in her mind, herself included. It was like the Nexus was her eyes, watching her as it changed. She could see Piper and Cole were in

awe of her and maybe slightly afraid. But Prue had the situation entirely under control.

When she opened her eyes again, the change was complete. The room was smaller, more intimate, with candles casting shadowy light throughout. Wooden cabinets lined the space filled with whatever spell-casting materials she could need: herbs and flowers, mortars and pestles. A fainting couch of purple velvet was off to the side, the perfect place to sit and think or lie back and meditate. Beside it was a small, round table with an even smaller cauldron sitting in the center. The room was finished off with a triquetra design in the floor, tying her to her sisters and the power that started them on the path they began together.

“You missed some of the books,” Piper said, pointing to a small stack in the corner.

Prue smiled. “No. Those are the Harry Potter books. I’ve been wanting to know how it ends.”

Piper laughed and took a seat on the couch. “Okay. Now what?”

“Now I commune.” Prue took a seat on the floor in the center of the triquetra, closing her eyes again, and filling her mind. She focused on the problem and the mystery herbs. She called out to locate the man named Jacob Perly. She asked for information on the mysterious Book of Light and how it was related to their own Book of Shadows, if at all.

Nothing came.

Prue refused to break concentration, calling out mentally for help from the Warren line of witches and the Council of Elders. She summoned assistance from anyone she could contact in the Upper Regions, and even a few beings she knew from the Underworld. The only response she got was a crick in her neck and a cold butt. The neck she couldn’t do anything about, but she added some heating devices under the floor so she could at least be more comfortable until she finally gave up.

When Prue opened her eyes again, she saw that Cole was gone and Piper was asleep on the couch. “I know it’s late here, but it’s still day in your time zone,” she said.

“What?” Piper slowly roused. “You’re back? Did you find anything?”

“Back? Did I go somewhere?” Prue asked, standing carefully. Her legs were tired from sitting.

“Not physically, but we couldn’t reach you,” Piper said. “You were out for over an hour.”

“An hour? It felt like seconds. But I didn’t find anything. Not a flash of insight. Nothing. How could I have been out an hour?”

“Beats me, but you were,” Piper said. “Cole went off to get some coffee. I must have dozed off in the meantime.”

“Well, that’s good at least. I was worried when I saw he was gone. I thought maybe he slipped out to go in search of some demon contacts.”

“No, just caffeine,” Cole said as he returned with a tray and three mugs. “Find anything?”

Prue gave her answer in the form of a look.

“Then I vote for my idea,” Cole said. “Failing any other course of action, it’s the most logical decision.”

Prue took a mug from the tray. “I’m not saying we won’t consider it, Cole. But let’s hold on to it as a last resort.”

Cole handed another mug to Piper. “Seems to me we’re running out of __”

Prue dropped her mug, spilling coffee on the triquetra. Her eyes glazed over, open, but not alert. Piper’s voice echoed in her mind: “Prue!”

Images flashed again. Painful. Hard. A vicious attack. Witchcraft against something . . . dark . . . but hidden within the light. *The light.* So bright. So *blinding.*

The room came into focus again. Piper and Cole were looking down at Prue. She was on the floor, beside the spilled coffee.

“Boston,” Prue said. “Go. Now!”

Piper didn’t ask any questions. She just called out into the air: “Paige!”

The Charmed Ones orbed directly to the scene of the attack. Prue had warned them that there wasn’t time for discretion. They’d already lost too much time getting Paige, gathering Phoebe, and having them travel back and forth around the world. If the situation were as bad as it seemed in her vision, their sudden appearance would hardly be noticed.

Prue had been right. The attack must have been awful. Paige, Piper, and Phoebe orbed right into the middle of the aftermath. It was someone’s home, or what was left of a home. Furniture was overturned and smashed. Pictures had fallen, littering the floor with broken glass. One wall was nearly blown out and a window completely gone.

They were too late. The attack was over. An older woman was on the floor, unconscious. No one else was there.

“Ohhh, not good,” Phoebe said, moving for the woman. “Not good. Ma’am? Ma’am, are you okay?”

No answer.

“Paige!”

Paige was beside her in a moment. She didn’t know what the exact problem was, but that hadn’t always mattered in the past. She held one hand over the woman’s head and the other over her heart, calling on her Whitelighter power to heal. Paige could feel the warmth spread through her body, emanating through her hands. A golden glow washed over the woman’s skin as she gasped and then breathed steadily.

The woman was slow to rouse. Her eyes flitted open and shut before she fought to become alert. As her eyes focused and she realized she was not

alone, she snapped back into consciousness. “Who are you? What are you doing in my house?” She looked around. “Where did that *woman* go?”

“Woman?” Paige asked. “It was a woman? Not a man?”

“Emily Fisk-Navarro,” she replied. “A repugnant witch hater.”

“At least this one’s not bothering to hide the truth from us,” Piper said.

“Did you say *Fisk?*” Phoebe asked.

“Why would I hide from the Charmed Ones?” the woman responded to Piper as she shakily got to her feet.

“You know us?” Piper asked.

“Three young women suddenly show up in the living room of a witch after a vicious attack? Who else would it be? I’m Charlene, by the way. Charlene Bell. It’s very nice to meet you. I’ve been a fan for years.”

Charlene offered her hand to Phoebe, who shook it gently, not wanting to hurt the woman after what she’d been through. Phoebe was accustomed to people familiar with her work at the *Mirror.* Her advice column had grown in popularity and her book, *Finding Love*, was already generating some buzz long before its release date. But the celebrity of being a Charmed One was still odd, no matter how many times people from the magical community had showed up on the Halliwell doorstep.

“So, you knew your attacker?” Phoebe asked as she released Charlene’s hand.

“Oh, yes,” Charlene said. “I’ve been dealing with her for years. I run the local Wiccan historical society. We work to shine a light on the injustices of the past. Not just for women perceived to be witches, but for all women. Of course, no one knows that I’m an actual practicing witch of the supernatural variety. Except Emily, apparently. She’s been trying to shut us down for ages. I never imagined she’d attack me on a magical level. Never suspected she could.”

“Is she a warlock?” Paige asked. “Evil witch, I mean.”

“No,” Charlene replied. “Just a mortal woman with an unfortunate hairdo. At least, I always thought she was mortal. She spends enough time railing against magic that I never expected to see her holding anything of real power.”

“She did all this?” Piper asked as she righted a chair so Charlene could sit.

Charlene blushed as she took the seat. “Technically, that was me. Emily had this book with her. Tried to use it to cast some spell on me in some language I’ve never heard before. Well, I wasn’t about to let her mess with me so I threw everything I had at her: spells, incantations, potions, my natural power. Nothing worked on her as long as she held that book. That just made me try harder. The last thing I remember is her opening the book. Then everything went black.”

“Did she have a powder with her?” Paige asked. “Green? Sparkling?”

“Not that I recall,” Charlene said. “But I went down hard. I don’t know what she did after I was out.”

The sisters gave each other a look. It was clear this woman held her magic very close to her heart. This was not going to be easy.

Phoebe was the first to speak. “We think Emily may have taken your active power. Can you try to do some magic?”

“That’s impossible,” Charlene said. “Emily is little more than a pest. She doesn’t have any special abilities beyond the power to annoy. Even with that book she held, she could never do anything like that.”

“I don’t think it was her, exactly,” Paige said. “I’m pretty sure it’s something about the book. It gives nonmagical beings access to magic they couldn’t normally control.”

“And you think she could have taken my gift?” Charlene’s eyes welled with tears as Paige’s cell phone rang.

Paige pulled the phone out of her pocket and checked the screen. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve got to take this.” She left the room so she wouldn’t disturb them any further.

Phoebe took Charlene’s hands. She didn’t need to be an empath to imagine exactly how the woman felt. “It’s possible. Can you try to do something for us? Something small, maybe?”

Charlene looked over at the broken lamp. “It’s dark in here. Let me light a candle.” She focused on the one candle on the mantle that hadn’t been knocked to the floor. Her eyes bore into it, like she was willing it to burst into flame. She stared and stared until her eyes let loose tears, but still could not manage a flicker.

“It’s gone,” she whispered. “It’s gone.”

Phoebe squeezed her hands. “We don’t know if it’s permanent,” she said. “But we’re doing all we can to see that it isn’t. And we want to make sure that Emily and whoever she’s working with can’t do this to anyone else.”

Charlene wiped her tears with the palm of her hand. “Tell me what I can do.”

“You said her name was Fisk?” Phoebe asked.

“Emily Fisk-Navarro,” Charlene said. “She married a man from Madrid. A lovely gentleman, actually. Far too good for her.”

“It’s the Fisk part I’m interested in,” Phoebe said.

“You recognize that too?” Piper asked.

“I think so,” Phoebe said.

“She’s from one of the oldest families in the area,” Charlene said.

“Do you recognize the name Perly?” Phoebe asked.

“Oh, yes,” Charlene replied. “That’s from another original family.”

“That was Henry,” Paige said as she returned. “There was an attack on a witch in Philadelphia earlier this afternoon.”

“Prue didn’t sense anything,” Piper said.

“This one failed,” Paige explained. “Or was interrupted. There was a shooting at a museum. The police aren’t exactly sure what happened. Henry’s contact at the police department flagged it because of the mysterious green herbs found at the scene.”

“Did they catch the guy?” Piper asked. “Or gal? I’m guessing attacks in three cities means three different attackers.”

“He got away,” Paige said. “But he wasn’t alone. Security cameras picked up someone else. The guy with the gun—he kept his face shielded from the cameras, but the kid who tried to attack—”

“Kid?” Piper asked.

“College student,” Paige said. “They identified him from the video somehow. They haven’t released the name to the media, but Henry’s inspector friend called in a favor. It’s a kid named Austin Herrick.”

“That’s it!” Phoebe burst out, squeezing Charlene’s hands in excitement. “He’s from one of the older families too, right? And when you said ‘in the area’ you didn’t mean Boston. You meant Salem.”

“That’s right,” Charlene said. “And those families have something else in common as well.”

“They were jurors during the time of the witch trials,” Phoebe said to her sisters. “They were the ones who condemned Melinda Warren to death.”

CHAPTER 9

Piper gave a gentle knock on the dorm room door, hoping that the occupant wouldn't yell out to ask who it was. The hallway was empty and she didn't want to call any attention to herself and her sisters. They wanted to get in and out with as little drama as possible. "We should go easy on the girl," she warned. "She's probably going to be a little jumpy. Someone did shoot at her today."

"We're used to dealing with people who've had fireballs thrown at them," Phoebe reminded her. "I think we're good."

The door swung open to reveal a young woman dressed in pajama pants and an oversized T-shirt that bore a smiley face with vampire fangs. She looked over the Charmed Ones with disdain. "I'm not giving interviews. I don't want to be a spokesperson for gun rights—or anti–gun rights for that matter. And how the hell did you get past the front desk?"

"Yeah. I think she's good," Paige said to Piper before putting on a bright smile and checking over the girl's shoulder to make sure the room was as empty as the hall. "We're not reporters. You might want to consider your position on gun rights though. And we got into the dorm like this." She orbed herself into the room.

The girl grabbed at her heart dramatically. "Oh my Goddess!"

"*Jumpy,* Paige," Piper called into the room. "I said go easy on her."

"I'm tired of the explaining part. Figured I'd cut to the chase. Show, don't tell." Paige picked a sketchbook off the bed. "Nice work."

“Excuse me.” The girl pulled the sketchpad out of Paige’s hand. “Personal boundaries, please.”

“I’d say she’s handling herself fine,” Phoebe said as she pushed past Piper and joined Paige in the dorm room.

Piper shrugged as she followed, closing the door behind her. She’d been a mother longer so it was possible she was a tad more overprotective than her sisters. Give it a year or two and Piper was fairly certain they’d be right along with her when it came to protecting their Innocents.

The girl’s walls were decorated with beautiful sketches mixed with politically themed posters. A portrait of an elderly woman on a bench sat beside a presidential Hope poster, while a drawing of a hummingbird floated above a giant X.

Piper lived at home during college, but she’d been in enough friends’ rooms at the time to recognize the traditional mix of personal touches and political statements. It was typical of that stage of life when young adults were learning how to express themselves. “I don’t think I invited you into my room,” the girl said.

Paige took a seat by her desk. “We’re witches, not vampires, Alysha. We can go wherever we please.”

“Paige!” Piper let out an exasperated huff, before focusing on the girl. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long day. You probably have some idea what I’m talking about.”

“Some.” Alysha plopped down on her bed, pulling her sketchpad into her lap. “How do you know my name? Did you read my mind?”

“No,” Phoebe said. “We read the police report.”

Alysha nodded like it was only natural that witches would be working with law enforcement. “And you are?”

“I’m Piper. These are my sisters Phoebe and Paige. We were hoping you could tell us what happened today. The parts you *didn’t* tell the police.”

Piper had initially thought the girl was being too casual about the encounter. That changed when she saw a hand sliding not so casually beneath the thin dorm room mattress. “Paige!”

“Mystery item!” Paige held out a hand and hundreds of orbs collected above it, dropping down into the form of a metal tube. With a flick of the wrist, the metal shot out from Paige’s hand, revealing itself as an expandable baton. Paige gave a sly smile as she examined the weapon. “I *like* her.”

The girl tensed on her bed, but didn’t move. “You can’t be too careful.”

“We’re not going to hurt you,” Phoebe said. “We just need to know about your attacker. The one that may have had a book with him? We think the guy with the gun might have been there to stop him.”

Alysha looked them over one last time like she was determining whether or not to trust them. “No, that’s not it,” she finally said. “It was the other way around. The guy with the book was trying to stop the one with the gun. That’s when it went off. The gun, not the book.”

“Okay, now I’m confused,” Paige said. “Could you walk us through the story?”

Alysha described the events at the museum, beginning with the moment she first heard the younger guy. She’d figured he was just trying to pick her up, but then he got all weird with his book and tried to act like he was about to do her some kind of favor. It wasn’t long after that she saw the dark-haired guy with the gun approach and suddenly she was telling them how she dove into the next room and hid inside a hollowed-out egg sculpture representing a woman’s womb.

“Interesting,” Piper said to her sisters. “Nat mentioned how that Jacob guy also acted like he was doing her a favor when he took her powers.”

“Nat?” Alysha asked. “Took her powers?”

“It’s okay,” Phoebe assured her. “We don’t think they’ll be coming back now that this incident made the news.”

Piper eyed the sketchbook. “You didn’t happen to draw any pictures of the men?”

Alysha clutched the book tighter. “I made one of the armed guy for the police since they couldn’t get a picture of him off the security tapes.”

“And the younger guy?” Piper asked.

Alysha flipped the sketchbook open and handed it over to Piper. “I thought he was kind of cute. In a goofy way. I know, I’m setting women back decades, getting a crush on my attacker, but I don’t think he was there to hurt me.”

“Oh, honey, we’ve all been there,” Phoebe said.

“Some of us are still there,” Paige replied, earning herself a glare from Phoebe.

“Just because he wasn’t aiming a gun at you doesn’t mean he wasn’t dangerous,” Piper said as she looked over the picture. She understood what Alysha meant by “goofy cute.” He was slight and a little awkward looking, how she drew him, with light, mussed hair, ears that stuck out a bit, and a scruff of stubble on his chin. The shy smile on his face said a lot about Alysha’s interpretation of him. He was the kind of guy Piper would hire to mow her lawn, only to have to go over the yard herself after he left to fix what he’d done. “That book he had with him could have done a lot of damage.”

“No, that’s not it,” Alysha said. “He was more worried about what I thought he was doing than what he was actually doing. I still don’t know what he was there to do, but I’m pretty sure he didn’t want to do it. Like, the guy with the gun was forcing him.”

Piper held up the page. “Can we take this?”

“Sure.” Alysha looked down at the ground and mumbled, “I have another one.”

Piper let Alysha tear the page out of the book for her as she bit her tongue. It wasn’t her place to make speeches about developing crushes on potentially dangerous men. The Charmed Ones did give Alysha some instructions to help keep her safe in case either of the men came back. They also gave her their phone numbers so they’d be the first call in case of emergency. “Call Paige before you do anything else,” Piper instructed. “She can get here fastest.”

“Time to get a move on,” Phoebe said, taking her sisters by the hand.

“There’s one more place I want to stop before we go home,” Paige said as they orbed out of the dorm room.

“A janitor’s closet?” Piper asked as she took in their surroundings. “Really?”

“Next time you need to travel around the country, catch a flight and then you can enjoy those spacious airline seats.” Paige pulled her foot out of the bucket she’d orbed herself into and listened at the door to make sure no one was outside.

It was after hours at police headquarters in Philadelphia, but she didn’t want to risk running into anyone on the graveyard shift. The janitor’s closet was a better choice than orbing the three of them into a bathroom stall. Last thing she needed was to be pulling her foot out of a toilet.

“I can’t believe we’re breaking into a police station,” Phoebe said.

“Yeah, because our frequent visits to the Underworld are normal things people do,” Paige replied.

“Do we even know where they keep the evidence?” Piper asked.

“Can’t be that hard to figure out. We just need to find a directory.” Paige peeked out the door. The coast seemed pretty clear, except for the camera

pointed luckily in the other direction. “Oh, Piper.”

Paige pointed out the camera and Piper froze the hallway. This gave them plenty of time to escape the janitor’s closet and search for something that would lead them in the right direction without the camera revealing they were in the hall. Whoever was looking at the video feed from that camera would be treated to an image that didn’t change while they made their way past.

With each turn, Piper froze the halls, keeping the cameras locked on images free of the Charmed Ones. The night shift kept the building active enough that they probably wouldn’t be noticed mixed in with everyone else that was actually supposed to be there. The real concern was later when the police checked the tapes. Considering that evidence was about to go missing, the Charmed Ones wanted to make sure there was no record of their being on the premises after the fact.

“What do you all make of this kid wanting to protect Alysha?” Paige asked. “Love at first sight or something else?”

“Maybe he’s stuck in the family business,” Phoebe suggested. “And he doesn’t want to have any part of hurting witches. Could’ve been his dad with the gun.”

“If these people going after witches are descendants of Melinda Warren’s jurors, could this have something to do with us?” Piper asked as they continued their search.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Phoebe waited for Piper to freeze the stairwell before they made their way to the next floor up. “They were the same jurors for all the trials. You know, the ones that condemned all the women that had no power to defend themselves.”

“Their descendants have had over three hundred years to get over the fact that the trials were an embarrassment to their families and a dark spot in our history,” Paige said softly as their footsteps and voices echoed

through the empty stairwell. “So why the hell are they going after real witches now?”

“I guess that’s the point,” Phoebe said. “Imagine your family spent centuries living down the fact that your ancestors murdered women accused of practicing witchcraft when everyone now believes there’s no such thing as witches. Then you find out that—*guess what*—witches are real. They could be in this for payback.”

“It’s possible,” Piper said as she froze the hallway outside the stairwell. “It just doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

Paige held the door open for her sisters. “Need I remind you that we’re breaking into a police station to steal evidence? Very little we do makes any sense.”

Phoebe shrugged. “We’ll get more out of the evidence than any police investigators will. And it’s one less tie to the magical community when that herb concoction disappears. You were right to bring us here, Paige. We need to get that evidence.”

Paige pointed to a sign at an intersection that directed visitors to several locations, including the one they were looking for. “Evidence,” she read. “That way.”

Piper froze the next hall, which brought them to a door that was their destination. “Would it really be in evidence storage?” she asked. “Wouldn’t someone be examining it?”

“Henry said they wouldn’t have the tools to do that here,” Paige replied. “It would have to be sent out someplace. To protect the chain of evidence, it would be held here until a messenger picked it up.”

“Wouldn’t it go out immediately?” Phoebe asked.

“You’d think,” Paige replied, pulling the door open slightly. “But if Philly is even half as backed up as the SFPD, we’ll be good. This is our best

shot. Once it's at the lab it will be harder to find and it could be there for weeks. We don't have that kind of time to wait. Piper?"

Piper froze the room through the crack in the doorway before Paige opened it all the way. They were in a small chamber with a counter and a metal cage separating them from rows and rows of shelves filled with white cardboard boxes with writing on them. The officer behind the counter—and the metal cage—was frozen as he read a file.

Paige didn't waste any time orbing them through the cage and into the file room.

Phoebe eyed the shelves. "This is going to take forever."

Paige bypassed the many rows of boxes. "It wouldn't be in storage yet. It would be someplace in easy reach for pickup."

"There." Piper pointed to a table beside the counter. It was covered with envelopes of various sizes and thicknesses.

"Good eye," Paige said as she reached for the envelopes.

"Fingerprints!" Phoebe snapped.

Paige stopped before she touched anything. "Good *catch.*" She leaned over the table, reading the labels on the envelopes. "Got it!" She held out a hand. "Bottle!" A glass bottle with sparkly green powder orbed into her hand as the envelope on the table deflated.

All three of the Charmed Ones leaned in to look at the mystery powder. "So that's what this is all about?" Phoebe asked. "I don't recognize it."

"Looks like oregano," Piper said. "But sparkly. We'll find out what it is soon enough. Orb us back to Prue's."

"Actually," Phoebe said. "I should get working—"

"No," Paige said.

"No?" Piper and Phoebe replied in unison.

"It is our children's bedtimes on the West Coast," Paige reminded them. "Between Halliwell's and this magic book/herb concoction, I haven't seen

my kids all day. I'm going home to put them to bed and then spend some quality time with my husband. I've also decided you two are going to do the same. All this can wait till tomorrow."

"But there could be more attacks," Piper reminded her.

"And we'd be no good to anyone functioning without sleep," Paige said. "You've spent most of your time on the other side of the world. I suspect your body clock has got to be all kinds of messed up by now. If you don't get some rest I'm afraid we could be the ones to have our powers stolen next and I'm not about to let that happen."

"She's got a point," Phoebe said.

Piper sighed. "You're right, Paige. Take us home. We'll get a fresh start in the morning."

CHAPTER 10

Austin was trapped and he couldn't escape. It wasn't a physical confinement. He wasn't chained to a chair or locked behind bars, but he was a prisoner all the same. There wasn't anywhere he could go. He couldn't begin to think of what he could do. Nothing in his relatively sheltered life had prepared him to be a fugitive from justice.

Austin considered himself lucky to get out of the city before they locked it down. Guns going off in public places wasn't easily brushed aside these days, even if the firing had been accidental. Austin was working very hard to convince himself it *had* been an accident.

Isaac hadn't said much during the train trip to Massachusetts. He'd kept his eyes closed and refused to speak, even when Austin asked him direct questions like, "What the hell were you thinking bringing a gun?"

It was like Isaac was in some kind of meditative state the entire six-hour train ride. His eyes remained shut, his breathing shallow. At one point, soft, groaning sounds came from his body even though his mouth had been closed. It was a little scary. Not just the noises. Austin had been afraid that if the groans had gotten any louder it would have called unwanted attention to them. He'd considered sneaking off at one of the stops, but he had no money on him and no idea of where he could go.

Isaac's eyes popped open a few minutes before they reached their station. They got off the train with the other passengers, just another pair of travelers visiting Boston, as opposed to fugitives wanted by the cops.

Austin may not have shot the gun, but that girl would have told the police all about him. They definitely would have seen him on the video from any one of the dozens of cameras stationed throughout the museum. At least he had the good sense to pay his admission in cash rather than credit card. Still, it wouldn't take long for him to be identified. He'd realized too late that the bag he'd carried the Book of Light in had his school logo emblazoned on the side. It wasn't that large a university. The police probably identified him before the day was out.

He was probably expelled as well. Universities had even less tolerance for gunplay than museums. At least he wouldn't have to finish the paper he hadn't started for that bioethics class. This one incident could mean a whole new direction for him. "Don't think a life in crime is going to be the answer," he mumbled.

"Yes, you'd be pretty bad at that as well," Isaac said as they reached their final destination. "But all is not lost. Emily and Jacob have both experienced considerable success."

"I told you we could have handled this ourselves," Emily said as she opened the door to the church rectory and ushered them inside.

Showing up in the wee hours of the morning at an old, abandoned church in the middle of nowhere felt so much like a fugitive thing to do. Austin didn't even have to know that police were searching for him for it to feel that way. There had already been indications that he'd gotten involved with the wrong crowd. This was a huge, garish sign with blinking neon lights and arrows telling him he screwed up big time.

"Greetings to you too, Emily," Isaac replied as she closed the door behind them. "Thank you for arranging the meeting in my absence."

Austin hated it when Isaac started talking like that. Four people getting together in the back of a church wasn't a "meeting." Why did he have to be so formal all the time?

“Here they are.” Emily’s lips broke into an uncomfortable grin as she guided Isaac over to a table that held two books identical to the one Austin had in his bag. The bag he really should have thrown away at one of the station stops. Should have changed his clothes too. Maybe dyed his hair and found some way to grow a beard overnight. He was going to have to get better at this fugitive stuff if this was going to become a new lifestyle.

Isaac’s hands hovered inches over the two books as if he was feeling the heat rise off them or something. Austin noticed he was careful not to touch the books in the process.

“You’ve collected the witches’ powers?” Isaac asked.

“Just like you said we would,” Emily replied.

“Not *just* like it,” Jacob said. Austin hadn’t seen him sitting in the corner at first. The shadows in the dark room had kept him hidden. “My book didn’t act much like a normal book when I tried to use it. Light came from it and I’m pretty sure it did something to the girl that had nothing to do with those magical herbs you gave me to use on her.”

“Mine too,” Emily said, though she didn’t sound nearly as skeptical as Jacob. In fact, Austin was pretty sure she was excited by what she’d done. “It kept me safe when that witch tried to use her dark magic against me. With these books we’re invulnerable to witchcraft.”

The chair Jacob was sitting in creaked as he got up. “I don’t like it. You claimed this was natural magic, Isaac. What happened in that computer shop did not feel natural to me. It felt very, very unnatural. I might even call it *evil*.”

“Oh, enough with the drama, Jacob!” Emily said. “We are doing the work of the just. We are ridding the world of witchcraft, like our ancestors attempted to do.”

Austin laughed. “You mean the crazy villagers who tortured and killed innocent women? That’s who we’re looking up to here?”

Isaac stared him down. “I would think you would hold your tongue, considering your failure today.”

“The kid’s right,” Jacob said. “I didn’t get into this for some random witch hunt. I want to do some good, to rid the world of *actual* evil. I don’t think using the tools of evil is the way to go about it.”

Isaac took the bag from Austin. “As I’ve explained before, these Books of Light are not evil. They are merely incantations—spells that humans came up with to fight the unnatural magic that witches possess. It was the only way the powerless could defend themselves. You saw yourselves how they worked with that mixture of herbs I provided. What could be more natural?”

“These books also freeze witches in place,” Jacob said. “I wouldn’t call that natural.”

Isaac opened Austin’s bag and slid the third Book of Light onto the table. “The books do protect themselves, yes. But only from dark magic. They won’t do us any harm.”

“He’s right,” Emily said. “The book protected me from that witch. I could never imagine the amount of magic she tried to use against me, but the book repelled it all like some kind of force field.”

“Doesn’t sound very natural to me,” Austin mumbled. Isaac glared his way, but didn’t say anything this time.

Austin was having a hard time swallowing Isaac’s stories about so-called “natural” magic. He’d read a lot of fantasy growing up. So many of those books talked about how magic was neither good nor evil, that it was all in how it was used. Austin didn’t think that attacking young women in museums was something good people did. He didn’t even know what the girl had done to deserve it. Had she ever cast a spell on anyone? Did she know how to do a curse? So far, all he had was Isaac’s word that witches were evil. He had no actual evidence.

Emily didn’t share his concerns. She seemed truly convinced. Jacob too. Even with his doubts, Jacob never questioned the core belief that witches were evil.

It was always possible that Austin had gotten mixed up with three crazy people. Maybe it was time to go to the police and tell them what he knew. The price of Isaac’s protection could easily become too high. Austin hadn’t actually attacked anyone—all he’d done was go to a museum with a guy that had a gun. What was the worst the police could do to him? It was beginning to feel like less of a concern than being with three lunatics who talked about natural and unnatural magic.

“Yesterday’s tests, while not a complete success”—Isaac glanced at Austin—“revealed that we are on the right path. These books allow us to be more than human, but less than witches. With their help, we can rid the world of the evil of witchcraft.”

“The *world?*” Austin asked. “That’s a lot of work for three people. Not counting you, since you can’t even hold one of these books.”

Isaac’s eyes narrowed. “Emily? Jacob? Could you go to the next room please? I need to have a conversation with Austin before we move on to the next stage.”

Austin tensed as the others left without a word. Jacob did allow for a look of concern before he went out in silence. This was it. Either Isaac was going to tell him to get out, or the man was about to pull his gun again. There was no doubt in Austin’s mind those were the only two options. Austin braced himself and prepared for fight or flight.

Instead, Isaac smiled, placing a hand on Austin’s shoulder and giving him what was probably meant to be a reassuring squeeze. “Always questioning,” Isaac said. “I enjoy inquisitive minds. So much more interesting than the blind faith of followers like Emily or Jacob’s ability to whine without bothering to do anything about his concerns.”

“Thanks?” Austin said, still bracing for the unexpected.

Isaac held a hand out over Emily’s Book of Light. “Would you help me with this?”

“Sure?” Austin picked up the book for Isaac and followed him over to the wall, not quite sure what they were supposed to be doing.

“Never let that facet of your personality die,” Isaac said. “It’s a useful trait. And part of the reason I chose you for the most important part of my plan.” Isaac pressed his hand against the wall. An invisible seam appeared in the woodwork and grew larger as two panels of the wall slid apart, revealing a hidden bookcase with rows of empty shelves. Isaac motioned for Austin to place the Book of Light on the topmost shelf.

“You still want me in on this?” Austin asked as he raised the book to the shelf. “Even though I screwed up in Philly?”

Isaac motioned for Austin to retrieve Jacob’s copy of the Book of Light. “Your ‘screwup’ was exactly the reason I knew you’d be perfect for that mission. Admittedly, I hadn’t expected you to step in once I pulled the gun. But I knew you couldn’t use the Book against that witch. You showed all the signs of reluctance . . . reluctance to trust me . . . reluctance to harm another.”

Austin put the second book up on the shelf. “It was a test?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Isaac said. “It was a setup for my Plan B. I wanted you to unsettle Alysha. I wanted her to be nervous . . . suspicious. So that when I pulled my gun, she would react without thinking. I’d hoped that she would use her magic in a very public space in a very showy way.”

“You wanted her to attack me? Attack us?” Austin asked as he examined the empty shelves in the hidden compartment. The shelves weren’t that interesting, but he thought he saw another seam in the center of the wall behind them. Either the walls came together naturally at that point, or there was a second hidden shelving unit or something else back there.

Isaac closed the two hidden doors, replacing the fake wall before Austin could get a good look. “Alysha has quite an interesting power. She creates these remarkable light shows—fireworks and explosions that are all flash and no substance. She’s the rare witch that is not truly a threat to anyone. But when these brilliant displays of power emanate from her hands, they make for quite an interesting display—one that would have been an incredible sight for the tour group full of witnesses to see. To say nothing of the exciting video the museum would have provided for the evening news.”

Austin finally realized what Isaac was talking about. “But when I tried to stop you from shooting her, I botched the plan. She never revealed her powers.”

“It’s my fault, really,” Isaac said. “I should have trusted you enough to tell you the truth. The gun was filled with blanks. If you had known she wasn’t really in danger, we might have had our victory.”

“But why?” Austin asked. “What’s that got to do with stealing witches’ powers?”

“Austin, this has never just been about taking witches’ powers,” Isaac said. “It’s about stopping *all* witches, everywhere. To do that, we must reveal them. Let the world know that the nightmare stories of their youth were all true. That witches are real. That the danger exists. Once we get the public to realize that these insidious creatures are hiding right next to them—their friends, their neighbors—it will make our job taking the powers of these creatures all the easier.”

“And then we what?” Austin asked. “Recruit more witch hunters?”

Isaac laughed again. It was just as unnerving. “Oh, Austin. The recruiting has already been done.” Isaac moved over to the double doors that he’d sent Emily and Jacob through earlier. “In the late seventeen hundreds members of the town council in Salem had many children. A lack of birth control coupled with a need for extra hands to help build a nation

made large families common back then. Most residents of Salem gave birth to more children than is typical today. Hundreds of years later, their descendants have many, many cousins.”

Isaac opened the doors to reveal the pews of the church. Emily and Jacob sat in the front row, stiff backed and attentive, waiting for Isaac to enter. Behind them, the wooden pews were filled with dozens of people of all ages. All of these people wore the same determined expressions on their faces, mixed with excitement and anticipation. These expressions were the final piece of the puzzle that Austin needed to realize he had definitely fallen in with the wrong crowd.

But the people themselves weren’t the truly frightening part.

At the end of each row sat a stack of books, identical to the ones left behind on the hidden shelves in the rectory. There were volumes upon volumes—far more books than people—with bottles of herbs atop each stack.

More than enough to steal the powers from hundreds of witches.

It was more than enough magic to start a war.

CHAPTER 11

“Paige!”

“Down in a second!”

Piper paced the living room in the Halliwell Manor. She’d gotten Leo and the kids off to Magic School after a nice, big family breakfast together with Paige and her brood. It was nice to cook for her kids again and spend some quality family time together, but now it was time to get back to Prue before this cult of whatever attacked more witches. Paige had seen her own husband and kids off as well and was taking her own sweet time getting dressed. Honestly, she could have done all that while Piper was making breakfast. They did have Innocents to protect.

“Piper, you’re going to wear a hole in the floor,” Phoebe said from the couch. “Sit down. You’ll get there.”

“*We’ll* get there,” Piper said. “I need you to come along and talk Cole out of going to the Underworld to make contact with his old cronies.”

“Why?” Phoebe asked. “The Elders left him with Prue so that he could help us. Can you think of any better way for him to do that? It’s not like we’ve got much use for an undead former demon. Let him do what he does best.”

Piper shook her head. “Phoebe, you know better than anyone why it would be dangerous for Cole to reconnect with his past.”

“He’s a big boy now,” Phoebe replied. “He’s got to take care of himself. I’ve got other responsibilities.”

Piper sat on the edge of the couch. “You really hate him that much? Or are you that afraid to see him again? I thought you’d moved past all this. You were going to try to be friends.”

Phoebe sighed. “The problem is that I don’t know what a friendship with Cole is. Do we hang out and catch a baseball game? Do I invite him over for dinner with Coop and the girls? I mourned for Cole and what we had. More than once. I think I’ve finally moved on.”

“If you’d moved on, you wouldn’t have so much of a problem spending time with him,” Paige said as she came down the stairs.

“About time,” Piper said. “Come on. Take us to Prue’s. We can deal with all of this one problem at a time.”

“No,” Paige replied.

“Again with the no,” Piper said. “We did what you said. We took the night off. And you were right. My kids were starting to forget what I looked like. It was great getting to read them bedtime stories, even when they kept wanting to hear the same one over and over. So, thank you for that. And I’m sure Leo wants to thank you as well. But they’re all at school and daycare now and in case you haven’t noticed, we’ve got a job to do.”

“You’re one to talk about jobs,” Paige said, refusing to back down. “Halliwell’s needs you too. As important as your family is, you’ve got more of a life here than just them. So, here’s what we’re going to do: *I’m* taking this bottle of magical herbs to Prue’s, where the two of us will work together to figure out what it is. Phoebe, you and Cole are going to the Underworld to see if you can find out about this book—or *books*, seeing as how they’ve shown up in three different cities so far. We need to know what it is, why humans can control it, and how it works with these herbs. I’d also like to know who’s in charge here. I’m assuming it’s the guy with the gun. What family did he descend from? Or is he someone else entirely? Or some*thing?*”

“But—”

Paige held up a hand. “No. We can’t send Cole off down there alone. If he shows up in the Underworld with a Charmed One, no one is going to talk to him. But if that Charmed One is his former wife, maybe he can convince some demons he’s managed to sway you back to the dark side or whatever. It’s our best shot.”

“Me and Cole on a trip to the Underworld,” Phoebe said. “What could possibly go wrong?”

“Prue’s waiting,” Piper reminded her.

“So’s your restaurant,” Paige replied. “Piper, I’m doing the best I can in your absence, but there are some things I just can’t handle. Like your obnoxious line cook. You need to take at least an hour to check in. Your employees are also forgetting what you look like. If there’s any emergency, I’ll orb you where we need you to be. Until then, you’ve got to deal with your life. Prue’s a big girl too. She’ll manage without you for the morning. Or evening. I guess it’s evening there. Well, whatever. We’ll be fine.”

Piper looked like she wanted to argue, but she didn’t say anything. Paige took that as an agreement. She grabbed Phoebe by the hand and started orbing before her sisters could change their minds.

“Sprinkle a tablespoon of herbs into the cauldron,” Prue said as she busied herself gathering items from the shelves in the small room. “I know the perfect spell we can use to figure out the ingredients.”

“Consider it done.” Paige didn’t see a measuring spoon readily available, but she’d spent enough time around real chefs in a functioning kitchen that she was familiar with how it was done. She’d just pour it into her hand. That was how the professionals did it.

Paige opened the bottle and started to pour, but jerked her hand away as the first sparkle of herbs was about to land in her palm. Perhaps herbs with

the power to steal magic from witches were not something she wanted to touch. She settled on pouring a bit directly into the cauldron and stopping when it looked to be the correct amount.

Paige was relieved to see that Prue was still busy examining the shelves and hadn't caught her near-boneheaded move. The last thing she needed was for the sister she'd only recently met to think she was an idiot. "Piper was right," Paige said. "This stuff does smell like oregano."

It was strange. Paige had been a witch for years now. Far longer than Prue had been aware of her own powers while she was alive, in fact. And yet she felt like a novice in her sister's presence.

It wasn't anything that Prue had done to make her feel that way. Far from it, actually. Prue had been incredibly welcoming. She even renounced her claim on the Power of Three so that Paige could remain in her rightful place. It was just that it had been hard enough years back for Paige to go from being an only child to having siblings. She wondered if she'd ever grow accustomed to this ever-expanding family of theirs.

"I like what you've done with the place," Paige said, carefully placing the cap back on the bottle. "It feels more like you here than when it looked like the Manor. I mean, it feels like I always imagined you, if that makes sense."

Prue returned to the table with her arms full of items. "One of my biggest regrets was never meeting you before I died. Well, not formally. I understand you stalked us at P3 before introducing yourself to Piper and Phoebe."

"*Stalked* is such a loaded term," Paige said. "I prefer *observed.* It's more scientific and less felonious."

"Gotcha." Prue carefully laid out the items on the table and handed Paige a bottle of blue liquid. "Pour half of this into the cauldron while I cut the stems off these flowers."

“Good thing you ignored the rules and came back to Earth,” Paige said. “Or else I may never have gotten to meet you. Well, not until I died myself.”

Prue carefully chopped at the stems. “Yes, this is much better than meeting in the afterlife.”

“You know what I mean,” Paige said as Prue dropped three flowers into the potion.

“I’m just giving you a hard time,” Prue said. “That’s what big sisters do.”

“Tell me about it,” Paige said. “You’re the third big sister I have now. Though you’re not nearly as crazy as the other two.”

“Oh, I have my moments.” Prue sat on the floor beside Paige. “That’s it for the ingredients. Now we just have to wait for it to boil. The herbs will separate and rise out of the cauldron individually. Then it’s just a matter of cataloging them to figure out what’s in the concoction.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Paige said as she leaned back. “This is much more fun than dealing with all the drama at Halliwell’s.”

“I take it restaurant work isn’t your dream job?” Prue asked.

“Not at all,” Paige said.

“Do you have a dream job?” Prue asked. “It seems like between Magic School and your Whitelighter charges, you’re more involved with the magic than Piper and Phoebe. You can’t forget to have your own life in all this.”

“I work a couple days at Social Services,” Paige said. “But I finally think I’ve settled into my dream job. I really enjoy being a Whitelighter. I like teaching a new generation of magic users how to control their powers.”

“Sounds like fate.”

“What do you want to do?” Paige asked. “If you weren’t stuck here, I mean. What would you like to be doing?”

“Honestly?” Prue asked. “I kind of like just being here to help you all. When I was alive I did have some fun jobs and fulfilling hobbies. But nothing was more important to me than working together with my sisters. Fighting demons. Protecting Innocents. If I have to be stuck here, at least I still get to do what I love. Even though my role may be in a more limited capacity.”

“Limited or not, I appreciate it,” Paige said as the contents of the cauldron started to bubble. “Piper and Phoebe do as well. We managed to take on the forces of evil pretty well when there were three of us. Just imagine how kickass we’re going to be with four.”

CHAPTER 12

No matter how many times Phoebe visited the Underworld, she was always surprised that it wasn't hotter. It was often a bit warmer than San Francisco—and some spots were downright hellish—but overall the climate was quite manageable. Nothing like she'd been raised to believe back when she thought it was a fictional place like Narnia or Disneyworld. (Since Grams could never afford the trip with the three girls, Phoebe spent the first ten years of her life believing the amusement park was entirely a fantasyland. It was only one of many harmless lies their Grams told them growing up.)

"I don't get why we're still doing this if we already know we're dealing with humans," Phoebe said as her eyes adjusted to the dim light of the caverns. "What do you think we can learn from some demons?"

"That book they're using had to come from somewhere," Cole replied. "It's unusual for humans to be able to wield that kind of power. But you know that already. So the question is—why are you asking?"

"Oh, I don't know," Phoebe said. "Maybe a trip to the Underworld with you wasn't supposed to be on my itinerary today."

"Brings back memories, doesn't it?" Cole asked.

"Not good ones."

They walked in awkward silence, beside one another, but not really together. Phoebe hadn't been to the Underworld in a while. There hadn't been too many reasons for a trip down since she'd had her kids. It wasn't like life had been boring in the past few years, but the problems she and her sisters had to deal with were more earthly issues. And some time was spent

Up There as well. But her trips to the land below had become fewer and farther between more recently. She could honestly say she didn't miss it. "Where are we going, anyway?"

"To visit an old friend," Cole replied.

"*Friend?*"

"Demons have friends," Cole said. "Well, more like alliances. But still, Eleazar is the demon least likely to kill us down here, so I figured he'd be a good place to start."

"Yes, the less homicidal the demon, the better," Phoebe replied.

"He's a sorcerer, actually," Cole said.

"*Demonic* sorcerer," Phoebe reminded him.

"He doesn't like it when people focus on that first part."

Cole led her through cave after cavern that all looked the same. She'd never find her way back out on her own, which didn't matter since she couldn't teleport home without Cole anyway. Cole had lost most of his demonic powers long ago, but he could still teleport himself and others when it was necessary. Even when it wasn't necessary.

After several twists and turns they came to a door. It wasn't the typical door one found in the Underworld. It wasn't imposing metal or enormous wood with an old brass knocker. The door looked to be made out of fiberglass, with an etched glass window, covered by lace curtains on the inside. It was the kind of door one might find in the suburbs, possibly in the center of a cul-de-sac or some other upper-middle-class residential area. Phoebe gave Cole the side-eye as he rang the doorbell.

A high-pitched male voice called through the door. "Just a minute!"

Phoebe shook her head. This was the strangest thing she'd encountered in the Underworld. And she was once its queen.

When the door opened, things got even weirder.

The man that opened the door was wearing a smoking jacket and silk pajama pants. He looked to be older, possibly around retirement age, though it was likely he was centuries beyond that. On Earth, he'd be easily mistaken for a kindly old man—maybe a little eccentric from the way he was dressed—but there was nothing to indicate he was either demonic or a sorcerer by the way he carried himself.

"Cole!" He practically squealed with delight. "I heard you were dead! But then again, most of the rabble down here are long past their own expiration dates."

"I was for a time," Cole replied. "But I'm back for now."

"So wonderful to see you again." The sorcerer grabbed Cole's hand and shook it vigorously. "And who is this lovely lady? Just back from the dead and already dating again?"

"I've been back a while now," Cole said as he allowed his hand to be pumped far longer than common custom allowed. "But this isn't a date. You remember me telling you about Phoebe?"

The sorcerer released Cole's hand. Now he did let out an inhuman squeal of excitement. "*This* is the missus."

"*Former* missus," Phoebe said, keeping her hands locked by her sides.

The sorcerer threw himself at her, pulling her into an uncomfortable hug. "Former, current, future . . . family is family."

Phoebe glared at Cole over the sorcerer's shoulder. The glare intensified when she saw that he was holding back a laugh. Poorly.

She tried to gently pry herself out of the sorcerer's clutches. "It's nice to meet you . . . ?"

"Eleazar," the sorcerer said. "Although Cole really should have introduced us formally. That boy never did have any manners."

"Tell me about it," Phoebe replied as Eleazar ushered her inside, where *strange* took on new meaning.

Eleazar's lair was decorated in much the same fashion as Piper's neighbor Mrs. Javitz had used in her house next door to the Manor. Oriental rugs on the floor, antique furniture covered in plastic, and tacky knickknacks covered every surface. It even smelled of mothballs and cats, like Mrs. Javitz's home, though there was no sign of an actual feline. The furniture looked completely out of place next to the stone cavern walls surrounding them.

"What an *interesting* place you have," Phoebe said with forced enthusiasm.

Eleazar clapped his hands together in excitement, taking her comment as praise. "Don't you love it? It's taken me forever to collect my treasures, but they just make this place ever so homey." He lovingly stroked a ceramic statue of a dog with overly large eyes and then waved for his guests to sit down.

"That they do," Phoebe said over the sound of the plastic seat covers moaning as she took a seat on the couch.

"Candy?" Eleazar held out a crystal bowl filled with hard candies covered in a sheen of dust that suggested it had been a very long time since the sorcerer had his last guest.

"Oh, I'm good," Phoebe said. "Cutting back on sugar."

"They're sugar free," Eleazar replied, holding the bowl ever closer.

Phoebe leaned back into the plastic-covered couch as if she were trying to get away from the candies. The look of hurt in Eleazar's eyes—mixed with something that seemed a bit more dangerous—suggested to Phoebe that it was in her best interest to take a treat. "Thanks," she said, grabbing a butterscotch drop wrapped in cellophane. "I'll save it for after lunch."

Eleazar perked up immediately. "Lunch! Are you staying for lunch? I can slice up some crudités for you to enjoy while I whip up some cucumber

salad. I just went to the farmers' market and I am positively loaded down with locally grown vegetables."

"Locally grown?" Phoebe asked, skeptically. She tried to hide her glance at the stone cavern walls.

"Thank you so much, Eleazar," Cole jumped in. "But we just came from breakfast and couldn't eat another bite."

"Of course, of course," Eleazar said. "You've been time-zone hopping, I see. Not good on the system to do that too much." He turned to Phoebe. "If you cut back on the travel, I'm sure you'll see a positive effect on those bags under your eyes."

"I'll keep that in mind," Phoebe said through clenched teeth. She seriously doubted that she'd be doing any time-zone hopping now, seeing the look of enjoyment on Cole's face. Still, she didn't want to upset Eleazar. No telling what a demonic sorcerer could do, especially one that got easily offended for breaking etiquette. "Cole?"

The former demon flashed her a smile and then got down to business. "Eleazar, we were hoping that you might have some information, considering how tuned in you are to the demon grapevine."

Eleazar sat up bolt straight and clapped his hands together in excitement. "Oh yes, the reason you've come to visit after ignoring me for all these years."

"I was kind of dead," Cole reminded him.

"I receive dead, undead, and nearly dead guests all the time," Eleazar said brightly. "A lack of life is no excuse for a lack of breeding."

"So true," Phoebe said. "I swear sometimes I feel like he's still possessed by a demon."

"Oh no, Belthazor was ever so much more polite," Eleazar said. "Even with all that unpleasant murder and mayhem, he always took the time for tea."

Phoebe eyed Cole. She was going to have to repay him someway for this fascinating visit to the Underworld. Possibly she'd take him Up There to spend the afternoon with Grams. That woman would make sure he had as unpleasant a time as possible. "Yes, well, you'll forgive me if I don't miss him," Phoebe said. "Anyway, we've heard about this—"

"Cole, Cole, Cole," Eleazar interrupted. "Perhaps you didn't explain to the young lady the price for information here."

"Price?" Phoebe asked.

"Nothing much," Eleazar said. "Just a little quid pro quo. The demon grapevine must be fed like any plant. And, as you know, down here we don't get all that much sunlight."

Phoebe looked to Cole questioningly. She had no idea what the sorcerer wanted.

"Gossip," Cole said. "He's looking for gossip."

"About us?" Phoebe asked.

Eleazar laughed. "Oh, no, no, no. You and Cole are old news. So last decade."

"Then what do you want?" Phoebe asked.

"Prue," Eleazar said. "I want to know about your sister. How is she enjoying life on the Nexus of the All?"

"You want to know about Prue?" Phoebe asked. "Why?"

Eleazar let out a sputtering laugh. "*Why?* A Charmed One returns from the dead in a new body only to renounce her claim to the Power of Three and set up shop at the magical Nexus that unites the realms? The only *why* I have to know is *why* is that even a question? Your sister is the talk of the Underworld. And I want to be the one with the scoop. So"—he leaned forward—"tell."

Phoebe took a breath. There was no way she was going to tell some demonic sorcerer her sister's personal business. It would not only be a huge

invasion of privacy, but she wasn't about to give him anything that he could use against her family in the future. It was impossible to fathom what he could glean from even the most innocuous facts since Prue was almost literally living in the unknown. Even the most harmless little piece of information could have far-reaching implications somewhere down the line. It was just too dangerous.

As true as that was, none of it was the real reason Phoebe was reluctant to share.

"I have to be honest," Phoebe said. "I don't really know anything."

"Oh, come now," Eleazar laughed. "Do you truly expect me to believe that? You can't tell me even the teensiest bit of something to tide me over until the whole story comes out? A tiny morsel of gossip? A soupçon, really, is all that I ask."

"She's redecorating?" Phoebe offered. The place didn't look like the Manor anymore when she'd popped by that morning. She hadn't asked why, but it wasn't too hard to figure out.

"I'll give her the name of my designer," Eleazar deadpanned. "If you want my assistance, you're going to need something more." His tone had turned more serious. His voice had dropped along with it.

Phoebe gave Cole a pleading glance. She didn't know what to say.

"Or perhaps you aren't stonewalling me," Eleazar said. "Perhaps you don't know what's happening with your sister. Would there possibly be a reason that you have not been out to visit her as often as you might?" He threw a meaningful glance in Cole's direction. "Maybe there is some interesting gossip to be had concerning the two of you?"

The answer to that one was more complicated than his question about Prue. Yes, it was true that Phoebe was avoiding Cole, but not for the reason the sorcerer was likely thinking. Either way, she wasn't about to share *that* with him either.

“How about something else in trade for the information?” Cole offered before Phoebe could say anything. “Something better than trivial gossip.”

“Gossip is never trivial,” Eleazar huffed. “But I’d be lying if I said my interest wasn’t piqued to think of what *you* could have to offer me.”

“Dinner,” Cole said.

“You’re not my type,” Eleazar said, eyeing Phoebe in a way that made her even more uncomfortable.

“Not a date,” Cole said. “A dinner. Prepared by one of the finest chefs in any realm at one of the hottest restaurants in San Francisco.”

Eleazar smiled as he realized where this was going. “Halliwell’s? A restaurant owned by a Charmed One?”

“Think about it,” Cole said conspiratorially. “A de . . . a *resident* of the Underworld as a welcome guest in the most notable restaurant ever in the battle of good versus evil. A full tasting menu at your fingertips. Why, I’d hazard a guess that your review of the place could get more hits than that time the seer Jazmeen uploaded the Demonic Codex.”

Eleazar huffed. “That attention whore. How *dare* you mention her name in my presence.”

“Oh, she’s the worst,” Phoebe jumped in. “Piper would *never* let that seer set foot in her restaurant. But for a sorcerer who paid us a small favor of some minor information . . .”

Eleazar grinned as he considered the offer. “Done! Now, what is it you need to know?”

CHAPTER 13

“Hi, this is Piper calling from Halliwell’s,” the restaurateur spoke pleasantly into the phone as she nervously tapped her pen on her to-do list. “I’m calling to reschedule my appointment for the annual heating maintenance checkup—”

“Piper!” Jackson, the line cook, bellowed as he exited the kitchen and made a beeline for her at the bar.

Piper placed her hand over the phone and hit him with the glare she usually reserved for Chris when he played orb-and-go-seek with his siblings without their permission. Jackson backed away slowly as a delivery guy came through the front door behind him.

“Oh?” Piper said into the phone without skipping a beat. “She did? It’s done? Well, never mind then. Thank you.”

Piper crossed another line off her to-do list. At this rate, she’d have everything done before the lunch rush began. She really couldn’t see any reason for her to take the day off from helping Prue to deal with these minor issues. The way Paige had been talking, it was like Halliwell’s was about to completely fall apart. The place was perfectly fine.

“I need someone to sign for these,” the delivery guy said as he placed a pair of boxes on the bar. He wore a uniform shirt with a logo that read The Graphix Is In.

“The new menus?” Piper asked as she signed the electronic clipboard he held out to her. The name of the company she worked with was lame, but there was no question that they did an amazing job. Piper updated

Halliwell's menu seasonally, and the design company had always given each piece a completely unique look that still managed to blend with the overall design scheme of the restaurant.

"The revised printing," he replied. "We've addressed all the errors the manager caught before signing off on them."

"But I . . . ? Oh, you mean *Paige,*" Piper said. "She's not the manager, but she did have approval to sign off on the menus. I'm sure they look great. Thanks!"

The delivery guy tipped an invisible hat to her and made his way out of the restaurant. Piper pulled a knife from under the bar and moved to open the first box when she realized Jackson was still watching her. "What?"

"I can't work under these conditions," the line cook said. "Chef is a tyrant who refuses to accept that I know more about cooking than she does. And your sister knows absolutely nothing about the restaurant industry. I can't be expected to work with amateurs. I left a prominent position in a five-star restaurant to try out this little mom-and-pop experiment you've got going here. I get calls daily asking for me to return."

"Then by all means, feel free to do that," Piper said.

"Excuse me?"

Piper sliced open the box. "Go. Don't let me stop you. Consider Halliwell's the latest entry on your résumé. I wouldn't suggest listing me as a reference. Or Chef. Paige might consider it if you ask her nicely."

"But—"

Piper raised the knife, casually waving it between them as she spoke. "Jackson, you've been an instigator in my kitchen since the day you arrived. I had hoped things would settle down in my absence, but they haven't. It's time to chalk this up to a learning experience and go on your way. I'll e-mail you details on any kind of severance, but right now I'd really like to not see you here."

Jackson huffed and stomped off toward the kitchen. Piper knew that she should have consulted with her chef first. She'd hired the woman to take control of her kitchen for the day-to-day stuff when Piper was bogged down in the minutia of management or off battling demons. The kitchen was Chef's domain when Piper wasn't around, but Piper doubted there would be any problem with the decision.

She focused on the menus instead. Paige had done a great job overseeing the printing. They looked great. Especially the bonus surprise she'd cooked up. She couldn't wait for the rest of the family to see it.

"Nice," Phoebe said suddenly from over her shoulder.

"Gah!" Piper nearly dropped the menu as she spun around to find Phoebe and Cole behind her. "What's with you two? You don't just go popping up behind someone like that. I was holding a knife a second ago. I could have killed you."

"Eh, I could hold off a knife attack. Besides, if anything happened Paige would have just orbed in to heal me," Phoebe said.

"Already dead," Cole added with a shrug.

Phoebe pulled the menu from Piper's hand. "This looks good. Prue's going to love it. Did they just come in?"

"Just now," Piper said. "I don't know what Paige was complaining about. Everything's running smoothly. The way Paige was talking, I expected the place to be falling apart."

"Things do look good." Phoebe handed the menu back to Piper. "I think maybe Paige was the one falling apart."

Piper put it on top of the box with the rest of the menus. "Yeah, well, if I ever want to go on a vacation, I know who I'm going to call."

"Vacation?" Paige said as she orbed in behind the bar. "What do you call the week you just spent on the other side of the world?"

Piper slammed her hand down on the bar. “Seriously! You all have to stop popping into my restaurant in the middle of a workday. Someone could see you.”

“It’s not like you’re open. You’ve got . . .” Paige checked her watch. “Oh. You should be getting ready to open.”

As if on cue, the wait staff came piling out of the kitchen, greeting Paige as if they were old friends. Piper waited patiently while they caught up even though they’d seen her only yesterday.

“We should move this to the office.” Piper led them out of the way of her staff once the pleasantries had been exchanged. “It’s small, but we won’t be in the way. Also, it’s the perfect place to suddenly materialize and dematerialize without being noticed.”

“Okay,” Phoebe said. “We got the message.”

As they walked to the office, Jackson came storming out of the kitchen with a bag in his hands. Piper knew all too well that it was his personal kitchen utensils. She should have taken it as a sign when—on his first day at Halliwell’s—he proceeded to list all the problems he had with every item in the kitchen. It wasn’t unusual for kitchen staff to have their personal preferences when it came to the tools of the trade. But he didn’t need to make a production out of it.

“You’ll be hearing from my lawyer,” he said in place of farewell and stormed out of the restaurant.

“What was that about?” Paige asked.

“Jackson is no longer an employee of Halliwell’s,” Piper said.

“Really? You’re not just messing with me?” Paige asked.

“He’s been a problem since day one,” Piper said. “I should have terminated him long ago. Frankly, I’m surprised you didn’t fire him.”

“Wait a minute,” Paige said. “I can fire people?”

Piper unlocked her office door. “Of course. Like I said when I asked you to fill in, you’re me when I’m not here. You can do what you want. Honestly, you’re doing everything that I’d do. I really appreciate your help. It’s nice to know you’ve got this place under control while I’m with Prue.”

“About that,” Paige said. “We should talk.”

“Yes,” Piper said as she ushered them into the small room. “I want to hear all about what you two came up with.”

“No,” Paige said as she filed in and leaned against Piper’s desk. “I mean the part about you spending all that time with Prue.”

“Later,” Piper said, closing the door to the tight quarters. “I want to know what you found out.” Piper waited for Paige to speak, but her sister just crossed her arms and stared.

Phoebe looked at her sisters, shrugged, and broke the silence. “There’s no such thing as the Book of Light.”

Piper turned to Phoebe. “What?”

Paige let out a melodramatic sigh. “That actually makes sense. Because the magical herbs they’ve been using? The stuff that smells like oregano? You might be surprised to learn that it’s oregano.”

“And?” Piper had to shift so she didn’t step on Paige’s toes.

“And more oregano,” Paige said. “It’s not a magical anything. It’s just oregano.”

“Oregano doesn’t sparkle,” Piper said. “I know. I use enough of it in my recipes.”

Paige slid to the edge of the desk to avoid being impaled by Piper’s elbow. “Glitter. It’s oregano mixed with glitter.”

“So let me get this straight,” Piper said. “We have a book of magic that’s not a book of magic and an herb concoction that doesn’t do anything. Then how are these witches losing their powers?”

“A very good question,” Phoebe said as Cole pushed into her.

“Can we move this conversation elsewhere?” Cole asked.

“In a minute,” Piper said. “I’m trying to figure this out. Why are these people going around and lying about what they’re using? It doesn’t make sense. And if they’re regular mortals then where is their power coming from? If it’s not the book—”

“It could be the book,” Cole said.

Piper shook her head in confusion. “But Phoebe said—”

“There’s no such thing as a Book of Light,” Phoebe repeated. “At least, not a spell book called the Book of Light.”

“And we know this how?” Piper asked.

“Long story,” Phoebe and Cole said in unison.

“We think the book is something else,” Phoebe said. “Something new.”

“And the oregano?” Paige asked.

“It’s for show,” Cole said.

All three sisters looked at him.

“Think about it,” he said. “We’ve got a book that’s not what it’s supposed to be. We have these so-called magical herbs that supposedly possess power they don’t possess. And we have a few misguided mortals who think they’re ridding the world of witches for the good of all mankind. If those aren’t the ingredients for some kind of mystical con, I don’t know what is.”

“Okay, then,” Piper said. “If that’s the con, then who’s the *con artist?*”

CHAPTER 14

Austin checked his watch for the twelfth time since they'd arrived outside the clearing in the woods. It was almost magic time in every sense of the phrase. According to the weather app on his phone, the sun would officially set in two minutes—"the twilight hour," as Isaac had announced ominously, as if Austin had never heard it called that before.

Austin still wasn't sure what he'd gotten himself into. He wasn't a true believer like the rest of these followers. He didn't know anything about this supposed "calling" that had passed down to him through generations. He barely knew his own parents. And he still wasn't all that sure that witches were real. The girl at the museum didn't do anything witch-like. Not that he could even begin to guess what it was that witches did.

It was feeling more and more like he was part of a cult. And not the benevolent kind of cult that Isaac kept insisting they were. They might not be using evil powers like the witches—if that was even true—but their actions weren't exactly benevolent. Skulking around the woods at nightfall and preparing to attack a coven of witches wasn't all sunshine and rainbows.

"I thought we had a job to do," Austin whispered to Isaac. "Something that didn't involve me taking magic away from witches?"

"We do," Isaac said. "You are merely here to witness the beginnings of a new world—one in which witchcraft comes to an end and a new power rises."

“New power?” Austin asked. That didn’t sound like what everyone else here was talking about. Not by a long shot.

“Our people are in position,” Emily whispered before Isaac could elaborate on his comment. “Are you sure doing this while there’s still sunlight is safe? Wouldn’t it be better to wait till it’s fully dark?”

Isaac hit her with a glare that he usually reserved for Austin. “As I’ve explained, the twilight hour is when these witches will be at their weakest. They will grow more powerful as the time approaches midnight. The longer we wait, the more likely you will fail. And I do not need to tell you what the witches will do to you if you fail, do I?”

“No,” Emily said as she backed away. “Sorry.”

Emily wasn’t the type to be easily unnerved, which made Austin even more concerned about the sway Isaac had over these people. He watched her as she slinked off, stepping carefully so she didn’t rustle any leaves or snap a twig. Austin considered doing either of those things or anything else he could to give the witches some kind of sign they were in danger. If the coven were on alert, maybe Isaac would put an end to this plan. At the very least, he might postpone the attack. Austin would welcome any delay as a chance to get out of whatever he’d gotten himself into.

“For someone who hates magic, you sure know a lot about it,” Austin said, testing the waters. If he got Isaac riled up, maybe he would make some kind of noise that would call attention to them. Austin was afraid of being the one to blame. Isaac had too many followers out in the woods with them.

Isaac smiled his unnerving smile. “This is what I meant earlier when I applauded you for your inquisitive nature. It will serve you well in the future. For now, though, you are not here to question. You are here to watch.”

“So, shut up?” Austin asked.

The glare he'd become so familiar with was the only answer he received.

Austin checked his watch once again in the fading light. It was almost showtime. He walked toward the clearing for a better look, moving just as carefully as Emily had. Tempting as it was to alert the witches, he didn't forget that Isaac still had his gun. Austin didn't believe for a second Isaac's lie about the weapon carrying blanks. If Austin blew this one, there was no doubt in his mind that his body would be the only evidence left behind.

Austin held tight to the tree trunk he'd taken position behind. Six women in flowing white dresses stood in a circle in the clearing. Isaac had explained they were preparing a ritual to welcome a new child into their coven. One of their sisters was having a difficult pregnancy. She was home on bed rest while the others planned to spend the hours until midnight chanting to whatever false goddess they believed in to heal the child and allow for an uncomplicated birth.

It sounded to Austin like they were doing something nice. But Isaac had emphasized to the others how it was all about adding strength to their coven. Even a newborn witch was just as dangerous to humans as the fully grown ones. The crowd had eaten it up, building in rage until the church shook on its foundation. Austin worried their next plan would be to light some torches and march on the pregnant woman's house.

But Isaac was smarter than that. Austin couldn't help but notice their leader had never mentioned going after the mother in his rousing speech in the early morning hours. Even Emily, the most intense believer among them, might have some problem attacking a woman with child.

Not that the women in the clearing looked any more dangerous. They were a diverse group, but none of them matched the extremes Isaac described when he drew inspiration from the history of witches portrayed in media. These women weren't haggard crones or femmes fatales. Even in

their flowing white dresses, they seemed like anyone Austin could meet on the street. They could very easily be normal people with full lives outside of their craft.

It was that thought Austin clung to as the sun continued to fade from the sky. Stealing the magic from these women might not destroy their lives at all. It was only one facet of who they were. That was a small comfort, but it was all he could come up with to justify what was about to happen.

Austin didn't need to consult his watch to know the sun had finally set. The witches began chanting in unison as if they were attuned to the moment twilight began.

Isaac's people made their move a moment later.

As the witches chanted, their own voices worked to cover the sound of their attackers' approach. Six people stepped out from the trees with their Books of Light already open, adding their own chants to the chorus. Austin knew there were six others hidden in the woods behind them, in case any of the witches made a run for it.

By the time the witches realized they were not alone, it was too late. They weren't running anywhere. They were frozen in place. Six bottles of herbs were thrown over the women. Six witches fell to the ground.

All the while, Isaac stood beside him, eyes closed, gently moaning like he had done on the train. It was an eerie keening sound that echoed the chanting around them. Or maybe the chanting echoed the moans?

Austin thought it might be time to run. Isaac's eyes were closed. Everyone else was preoccupied with the attack. But run where? He was in the middle of the woods at sunset in a state he'd never visited before. Even if he could find the road again on his own, he was miles away from civilization. He didn't even know which direction to take, and darkness was continuing to fall.

The moment passed when he was distracted by the different colors of light rising out of the bodies of the unconscious witches. Each of the books absorbed those lights, pulling the last bit of power from the women. Austin was watching magic—*real* magic—right before his eyes.

It was mesmerizing. He wondered what, exactly, he was looking at. Was it their auras? Did the magic run through their blood? What was this odd colored light being absorbed into the books?

Austin jumped as the six books slammed shut once the last glimmer of light was inside them. Shouts of joy came from the six attackers as they raised their books in celebration. The other six followers came from the trees with their own books, adding their voices to the mix.

The loudest voice soon belonged to Isaac, whose eyes were now open and mouth was split into a sickening smile. “Nice work, everyone!” he shouted, bringing a hush to the clearing. “We have dealt the witches quite a blow this evening. But it is only one victory in a war that, I assure you, will not be as easy as this. Let’s save the celebrations and move on to your next targets. We must strike quickly before the witches can rally their forces. Before news of our work reaches the Charmed Ones.”

Mumbles of concern grew from the group at the last part. Austin had no idea what Isaac was talking about. Charmed Ones? Who were they? And why did everyone else seem to know about them already?

Emily kicked one of the unconscious women on the ground. “What should we do with these witches?”

Austin tensed. He did not like the look in some of their eyes.

“Leave them,” Isaac said. “They are of no use to us now. Remember, we want to keep the public on our side. We can’t do that by harming people. Even if they are witches. No hangings. No burnings. Nothing to turn public opinion against us. We are in this for the long haul. Now leave the books

that have been used here with Austin. Their power has been depleted and they will be useless to you."

Emily and the five other attackers placed their books in Austin's arms. He struggled under the weight of them, but didn't bother to complain. Isaac wouldn't listen to him. Or worse, he would.

"Now, move on to your next targets," Isaac said. "The night is young and full of promise. Austin and I will enact the next phase of our plan: revealing witches to the world."

"That should bring us more allies," Emily said with a satisfied smile. "It is time for us humans to take back our world from the darkness that poisons it."

"That it is," Isaac said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "*That it is.*"

Austin strained under the weight of the books in his arms as he watched the others disappear into the woods. "I don't think I can make it back to the car carrying all this stuff."

Isaac laughed. It was even more disturbing than the moaning sounds he'd made while his followers stole the witches' powers. "Not a concern, Austin. We no longer need to hide behind human methods of transportation."

Isaac placed a hand on Austin's shoulder and they disappeared.

"Prue! Prue! Are you okay?"

"Prue! Get up!"

"What happened? What's going on?"

"Give her some air. Let her breathe."

The voices overlapped as Prue regained consciousness, making it hard for her to tell who was speaking. Images appeared in front of her, blurry at first, before coalescing into her sisters and Cole.

Prue was on the floor of her new magical chamber. She'd fallen on the triquetra painted on the floor. Her shoulder ached. She must have landed on her side. If this were going to keep happening, she'd have to consider mattresses for floors in her new redesign. She took Piper's hand and let her sister help her to her feet, moving slowly as the world righted itself.

"It happened again," Prue said as she steadied herself and moved over to the appropriately named fainting couch. "Witches having their powers stolen from them. This attack was bigger. A coven. And it wasn't just one person. It was many. There was something else too. Something . . . more. A presence. I didn't feel it before."

"Presence?" Piper asked. "Like a magical one?"

"It's possible," Prue said. "But it's not like I'm picking up a clear video with play-by-play commentary. It's a combination of feelings and imagery."

"Here." Cole handed her a glass of water.

Prue took a sip. "Thanks. It's all so overwhelming."

"Tell me about it," Phoebe said. "So you're getting premonitions now?"

Prue could hear the concern in Phoebe's voice mixed with what she took to be a small amount of jealousy. "Not premonitions, no. I can't see the future. I'm seeing things as they happen, but I can't do anything to stop them. And I don't think it's me. I'm pretty sure it's this place. The Nexus is reacting to the imbalance of power. It isn't something I can turn on and off at will."

"Good to know you won't be spying on us," Paige said. Prue knew that she was going for levity, but the comment fell with a thud. This was serious business and they all knew it.

"Your arm's glowing," Piper said.

The star had disappeared from the tattoo that had been a pentagram earlier. It was now a hollow circle. They all watched as sections of the tattoo disappeared, taking it from a solid line to a broken series of dashes. It

didn’t hurt as it changed, but Prue’s arm did tingle like she’d fallen asleep on it.

Prue assumed the broken circle referred to the coven she had seen. There was something else too. A lingering feeling, like a potential loss of innocence, like the coven had been protecting something as well.

“You should go,” she said to her sisters. “There’s nothing you can do for the coven right now, but maybe they can lead you to whoever is doing this before it goes too far. I have a feeling this is only the beginning.”

“Did you get that from your vision too?” Phoebe asked.

“No,” Prue replied. “That comes from experience.”

Phoebe breathed again as Paige completed orbing herself and her sisters into the clearing in the woods of Massachusetts. For some reason, Phoebe always held her breath when she traveled with Paige or Coop or even Cole. No matter how many times she disappeared in one location only to pop up in another, she somehow felt like she was taking her last breath as she began to dematerialize. Considering the number of dangerous situations they popped into on any given day, it wasn’t a completely unreasonable thought.

There was nothing waiting to attack when their orbs finally reconstituted into the bodies of the Charmed Ones. No, the attack had finished sometime before they arrived. A half dozen women dressed in white sat on the ground around a makeshift altar comforting each other. A few of them were crying softly. One was off on her own, away from the group, overcome with emotion. Phoebe didn’t have to ask what had happened. Prue had seen it all. They were too late. All they could do was help pick up the pieces.

A dark-haired woman saw them first and threw herself between her coven and the Charmed Ones. “Who are you? What do you want?”

Phoebe appreciated the woman's bold move in protecting her own. Following an attack, this woman had no idea what they had arrived to do and she was still willing to fight for her family of witches. And she was going to do it without her powers as well. Phoebe assumed the crying had to do with them figuring out what had happened. "It's okay," she said. "We're here to help."

She held her hands up in the traditional pose to show they were unarmed and the witches moved back. Holding hands up in these circles meant something totally different and Phoebe was quick to put her arms down at her sides lest they think she was about to throw a fireball at them or something worse. "Sorry. Forgot my audience."

"You still haven't told us who you are," the woman said, still holding back with her coven.

"We're the Charmed Ones," Paige said as if that explained everything.

Apparently, it did, because the women in white immediately relaxed and smiles broke across a few of their faces. "*The* Charmed Ones?" the dark-haired woman asked. "The Warren Witches?"

"We go by Halliwell now," Piper said, which elicited a polite cough from Paige. "And Matthews . . . well, Matthews-Mitchell."

"I'm a stepsister," Paige explained. "And a hyphenate."

"We kept our last names," Phoebe said with a nod to Piper. "But I'm guessing you all don't care about that right now."

"Someone took our powers," a woman from the back said.

The dark-haired woman stepped forward. She had a more relaxed stance now. "I'm Monica. These are my coven sisters." Phoebe smiled as Monica introduced the women by name, making note of each one and filing it for later. She met so many people in her travels that she'd become very good at committing names to memory because there was always a chance she was going to run into them again.

Piper returned the introductions by sharing her and her sister's names, which turned out to be unnecessary.

"Oh, we know all about you three," Monica said. "And your sister is back? Prue?"

"Guess it's not just the demon grapevine that's spreading the word," Phoebe said.

"Yes," Piper said tentatively. "Yes, she is. In fact, she's the one that sent us to you. She's the one that told us about your powers being stolen."

"Couldn't have gotten here sooner to stop it, could you?" a voice said from the back of the group.

"Vanessa!" Monica rolled her eyes. "Sorry about that. I'd like to blame that outburst on the fact that we've all been through a traumatic experience, but she's always like that."

"I thought that one got premonitions," Vanessa said, pointing at Phoebe.

"It doesn't always work on demand," Phoebe retorted. "Which you should know if you're really a practicing witch."

"We know," Monica said. "It's just . . . not a good time for us right now. One of our sisters is in a difficult position. We were trying to help her tonight through our magical bond. Having our powers taken from us on this, of all nights, makes things more complicated. Do you know what's going on?"

"Some," Piper said. "We're working out the rest. Can you tell us what happened here?"

Phoebe listened as Monica shared her story, growing agitated as she heard the details. It was fairly concise and shocking all the same. Six people had come out of the woods with six different Books of Light. They were long gone before the coven had regained consciousness to discover they could no longer call upon their active powers. Monica concluded the tale at

the moment the Charmed Ones arrived. By that point, Phoebe couldn't speak—she was so afraid to put what she was thinking into words.

"Was this guy part of the group?" Piper held out the drawing of Austin that Alysha had provided.

Monica shook her head. "I didn't see him."

She shared the drawing with the rest of her coven, but none of them recognized the face.

"What about a man with long, dark hair?" Paige asked, recalling the description of the gunman from the police report. "Anyone like that?"

Six heads all shook in response.

Phoebe finally found her voice. "There may be clues in the forest. You all wait here while we look." She grabbed her sisters and pulled them into the trees.

"Hey," Paige said as she was dragged along. "It's dark in there."

"Oh, light some orbs," Phoebe said once they were safely out of earshot of the coven.

"What is it?" Piper asked, seeing the concern on her sister's face even in the darkness.

"It's happening," Phoebe said. "The witch hunts."

"Yeah," Paige said. "For a day now. Where've you been?"

"No," Phoebe insisted. "The *witch hunts.* We saw this coming. Ten years ago. Prue, Piper, and I traveled to this time. To a world that knew all about witches and was going after them."

"I know the story," Paige said. "But you stopped it from happening. That prosecutor never found out about you. Your friend is safe. You never murdered that baseball player. There are no witch trials."

"Not yet," Phoebe insisted. "This isn't just a couple people going after witches. This is a group. At least eight people, maybe more. It's bigger than we thought. And it's happening at roughly the same time it was supposed to

happen. Yes, we stopped individual elements of the future we saw from happening, but can you ever really stop fate?”

“Yes,” Piper said. “We’ve stopped it, reversed it; we’ve made it run and hide with its tail between its legs. You’re only tying this to the future we saw because it’s linked to the past with Melinda Warren. History isn’t repeating itself. This is just another form of evil like all the rest.”

“No,” Phoebe said. “This is different. These are humans.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Paige said.

“Either way, we’re not going to get anywhere worrying about this in the woods,” Piper said. “Now that you’ve pulled us out here, let’s at least try to look for some clues.”

The Charmed Ones spread out to scour the area, which was fairly impossible to do in the dark night, even with the orbs Piper called up to give them some light. Phoebe wasn’t sure what they were supposed to be looking for, but they’d learned long ago that clues didn’t always come with an explanation. They could learn a lot from a broken branch or even a discarded piece of trash.

If there really were such a thing as witch-scene investigators, as Paige had joked the other day, there’d be no telling what they could discover. As it stood, the Charmed Ones were probably some of the best detectives in the magical community. Even with the light of the orbs, it was difficult to make anything out in the shadows of the trees. Phoebe thought she saw something moving in the grass and leaned in to investigate closer, only to find it was a huge rodent. She took a sudden step back and tripped over the root of a tree. Falling, she held out a hand to steady herself and grabbed onto the trunk of that same tree. She stayed on her feet and was hit by flashes of imagery.

A TV screen with a national news anchor, the handsome one with the perfectly coifed hair. A chyron below his talking head read: Are Witches Real?

Cut to a blurry video of what looked to be a demon attacking patrons of an art gallery.

Close-up of Alysha very clearly revealing her powers to the world.

The images disappeared from Phoebe’s mind, replaced by her sisters in front of her looking concerned.

“It’s happening,” Phoebe said. “Magic is about to be revealed to the world.”

CHAPTER 15

Austin was underdressed. He stood out in his jeans and T-shirt mingling among the suits and fancy dresses at the art gallery. But that was the least of his concerns. He was back in Philadelphia, the city where he was wanted as an accomplice to an accidental shooting at a museum. Not that that was even his biggest concern. The more problematic issue was that Isaac was somewhere in the vicinity with his ability to teleport that could put him right beside Austin without warning.

It was hard enough to believe that witches were real, but Austin couldn't begin to guess what Isaac truly was. The man wasn't saying, if he was even a man at all. Either way, there was a lot more at stake here than some families with a centuries-long grudge against witches.

Austin knew that Isaac had been using them all. That much was obvious from the start. But how would Emily and Jacob and the others feel if they knew that Isaac had dark powers of his own? Powers that were probably even darker than the abilities that witches possessed. There was no doubt in Austin's mind any longer: They weren't on some noble mission to rid the world of the evils of witchcraft. Isaac had his own agenda. One that made Austin consider witches in a different light.

None of that mattered at the moment. All Austin could focus on was the danger he was in. The danger they were *all* in. Isaac had teleported him to this event for a reason. They weren't there to take in the artwork.

It was a rare piece of luck that they weren't at Austin's college campus. Less chance he'd run into anyone he knew at this gallery showing of a

professor’s artwork. Students and faculty mixed and mingled as the caterers walked among them with champagne and hors d’oeuvres, weaving in and out of the maze of temporary white walls with splashes of color on them.

The police were probably out in force scouring the campus of Austin’s school looking for him. His college ID was probably plastered up in the campus security office and handed out to all the officers. If he managed to get out of this situation alive without being expelled or incarcerated, the first thing he was going to do was get a new photo taken. The odds were slim that his photo was going to be used on any kind of all points bulletin ever again, but he wanted to be prepared just in case.

Security might have been alerted to him at the art school as well. It was possible that Alysha was under protection in case he came back. He doubted anyone would really expect him to show up at her school. That would have been foolish, considering the authorities had to be on the lookout; it would be almost as bad as returning to the scene of the crime.

Austin had used all that logic on Isaac, trying to convince him to teleport them someplace else. He had dozens of followers who would be more than willing to take Austin’s place. But Isaac insisted: it had to be Austin. Then again, that could work in Austin’s favor. A plan was forming as he finally saw his target.

Some people looked better when dressed up, while others were more attractive in casual clothes. That wasn’t true about Alysha. At the museum she wore jeans and a sweatshirt. Both were smudged with charcoal from her drawing. Tonight she was in the fanciest dress an art student could afford. Both times, her natural beauty shined through. She wasn’t conventionally attractive, but neither was Austin. But there was something about Alysha that lit up the room, and it had nothing to do with the magical witch powers Isaac said that she possessed.

Alysha hadn’t seen him so far, which was probably for the best. Now it was a question of how to make an approach without freaking her out. He didn’t need her shouting for security before he could even say hello.

The gallery worked in his favor. Partitions had been set up at odd angles to showcase the artwork. Where there weren’t walls, there were enough patrons milling about to block him from view. A few sidesteps followed by a circular route around a wall found him right in front of a picturesque painting of some mythical land where unicorns frolicked with fairies and a rainbow melted into a pool. With all that Austin had seen lately, it was possible that the land in the picture was as real as he was, but he preferred to think of it as a fantasy. It was easier to stomach.

Alysha stood alone, admiring the work.

Austin took a deep breath and said a silent prayer to a power he didn’t believe in. “If I promise I’m not here to hurt you, will you promise not to scream?”

He thought he saw the barest uptick of a smile on the edge of her lip. “Depends,” she said. “Are you worried I’ll scream for the police or just scream at you for ruining a perfectly productive afternoon at the museum?”

“Both?” he said.

“What do you think of that painting?” she asked, refusing to look at him.

The question was unexpected, to say the least. “It’s . . . cheery?”

“Yes. Yes, it is,” she replied. “It would look perfect in a child’s bedroom, but since Professor Minrova is head of the art department, we all have to come out to *ooh* and *ah* at his work.”

Austin allowed himself his own smile. “That’s not what brought me to this gallery.”

Alysha finally turned to face him. Any hint of a smile was gone. “Coming here was stupid. You should be at least a couple hundred miles

away.”

“I was actually three hundred miles away a few minutes ago,” Austin replied. “Bet you know at least a couple ways I could have gotten here so fast.”

Now came the fear. She was trying not to show it, but it was there in her eyes and the slight tremble in her hand. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“It’s okay, Alysha,” Austin said, taking her arm. He guided her toward a quiet corner of the gallery. “I’m honestly not here to hurt you. I need your help.”

“You try to shoot me the other day and now you want my help?”

“I wasn’t . . . I didn’t have the gun.”

“You were with the guy that did.”

“Yes and no,” Austin said, checking to make sure Isaac wasn’t near. “I was with him, but not really. He’s dangerous. I’ve gotten myself into something that I didn’t intend to. And you’re wrapped up in it too. But if we work together—”

“Why should I trust you?”

“Because you don’t have a choice,” Austin said. “Look, Isaac’s insane. And he’s got magic too. He can teleport. Maybe do other things. I don’t know. What I do know is that he’s got a video camera. He wants me to force you to reveal your powers so he can record it and give it to the media. He wants to out you as a witch.”

“You’ve got to be kidding,” Alysha said.

“I’m not.”

“Look, Austin—that’s your name, right? Or were you lying to me at the museum?”

“It’s my name,” he said.

“You may or may not already know this, but I come from a long line of witches,” she said. “I learned to hide my magic before I even learned to control it. Do you honestly think I’m just going to whip out a light show in the middle of a crowded gallery? My magic makes for a pretty show, but it’s nothing useful. What’s the plan anyway? Did Isaac think you could scare me into putting on a fireworks display?”

“He said he’d leave it up to me to figure out. That I should get you talking and find out a way to get you to use your magic. But that’s not the point—”

Alysha laughed. “You’re kidding, right? Your partner has some big scheme to reveal that witches are real to the world and it all comes down to small talk? That’s a pathetic plan.”

“He’s not my partner.” Austin was speaking to Alysha, but his eyes were scanning the room. “And you’re right. It’s not a plan at all. Which means Isaac’s up to something else. We’ve got to get out of here.”

Austin moved toward the back exit, which was just around the partition. When he turned to make sure Alysha was with him, he was surprised to see that she hadn’t moved. “Are you coming?”

Alysha stayed were she was, about eight feet away. “Look, Austin, you seem like a nice-enough guy who pals around with questionable friends, but there’s no way I’m going anywhere with you.”

“We’ve got to leave,” he insisted.

“I get that,” she replied. “It’s not safe here. Message received. But I’m not going with you. You’re cute and all. I’m enjoying the chat, weird as it may be. Still, there is no way in hell I’m going out some back exit to some dark alley with a total stranger. So just continue on your way and I’ll go mine. There’s a security station in the quad outside the gallery. I’m taking the front door and heading there.”

Austin couldn’t imagine what campus security could do in this kind of situation, but he wasn’t about to argue. He considered forcing her to go with him, but she was not the type to go quietly and he figured they’d never get anywhere with her kicking and screaming. The only way this didn’t blow back on both of them was to follow her lead.

He reached into his pocket and took out a page from the Book of Light that he’d torn out during his brief visit to headquarters to drop off the books before coming to the gallery. “Okay, fine. But take this. Keep it someplace safe. If we get separated, you need to give that to someone who can help.”

“I know just the people,” she said.

“Take care of yourself,” Austin said, resisting the urge to give her a quick kiss on the cheek that would likely wind up with him getting smacked in the face. “I’ll meet up with you later.”

“I’ll count the seconds,” she said, dryly.

Austin couldn’t help but smile as he made his way around the partition for the back door. A sign said that it was alarmed, which stopped him for a moment before he realized that worked in his favor. An alarm going off could clear the place quickly. Not only would Alysha be safe, but so would all the potential innocent victims in the gallery as well. He gave the door a hard push, bracing for the sound, only to find it refused to budge. He pushed again. And again. No movement. No alarm.

There were only two exits from the gallery and one of them—the emergency exit—was locked. That seemed like a fairly serious fire hazard. It was possible that it was just an oversight, but it seemed more intentional than that. This was Isaac’s work.

Austin took a step back and checked to make sure Alysha was making her own way out of the gallery. Everything would be okay as long as she was safe.

It took a few seconds to see her through the crowd, but Alysha had just reached the front door. There was no sign of Isaac. It was possible he was waiting for her in the quad, but the gallery with its security cameras and dozens of guests with cell phones was the best spot for the attack. If she just made it through the door, Austin felt she'd be safe.

His heart fell as he saw her push the glass door, only to step back from it a moment later. It was locked as well. She turned in his direction and their eyes met through the crowd. Any trace of humor in her expression was completely gone. She knew just how serious this was about to become.

Austin saw a fire alarm. An alarm would call for help, but it might also cause a panic inside the gallery when the patrons realized they couldn't get out and there might be a fire in the building. Security was just across the quad, as Alysha had said. They would probably have some kind of universal key that would get them into the building, but again he had to wonder what they could possibly do to stop whatever Isaac was.

It didn't matter what Austin decided. Everything stopped when the red whirlwind formed in the middle of the gallery.

Cries of fear and shock filled the gallery as the people along the edges of the room made for the exit. Austin stepped aside as the first few patrons to reach the back door slammed into it. "It's locked!" he called over the noise, hoping to stop the crowd and avoid anyone being crushed. Some listened, but most did not.

Alysha was having the same problem at the front.

Some patrons remained, transfixed by the swirling red that finally formed into a body. Austin had expected to see Isaac at the center of the maelstrom. The creature that did appear bore some resemblance to the man he had come to know, but not very much.

The *thing's* skin was red with streaks of silver. His black hair was wild and unkempt, raising inches off his head and forming two peaks around

what seemed to be horns. He was taller than Isaac, by at least a foot, maybe two. When the creature turned to face Austin, there was no doubt in his mind. This was Isaac in his true form. He was some kind of monster, not a man. And his eyes blazed with fiery hate.

Before Austin could speak he watched as those eyes turned to face Alysha. She'd moved away from the doorway and was trying to hide behind a partition. People cleared the path between her and the unexpected visitor, trying to get out of the way.

The Isaac thing raised its hand—or paw—and a fireball shot toward Alysha.

"*No!*" Austin shouted.

The fireball took out the partition, destroying the serene painting of a white winged horse drinking from a moonlit pond in the process. Alysha was unharmed, but Isaac was moving toward her.

"Alysha!" Austin pushed his way through the crowd, fighting upstream, as the patrons ran toward him and away from danger. A heavily perfumed woman took him down with her overly large purse, and a man stepped on his thigh as he hit the floor.

Austin fought his way back onto his feet as the crowd continued to surge toward him. Over their heads he saw bursts of green, yellow, and red coming from the opposite end of the gallery. The gallery lights flickered with the colors as he pushed his way past the final person in time to see what was happening.

Another partition had been taken down, leaving a clear space by the front of the gallery. The area was filled with fireworks of light, a beautiful show that had absolutely no effect on the Isaac monster as it stomped its way toward Alysha. She had been right. Her power put on a nice show, but it was completely useless as a form of defense. It was going to look incredible on the security cameras filming it and the cell phones raised by

the few lunatics more interested in posting this crazy fight online than concerned for their own safety.

Not that anyone would be looking at the light show. The news would be about the huge creature approaching the young witch, looking like he was about to kill her.

Austin had to do something. He had to stop Isaac, but there was no way he'd be able to clear the destruction in time to reach her. Isaac was already raising his paw-like hands and another fireball was forming. There was nothing between the creature and Alysha to stop it from killing her.

"NO!" Austin held out his hands and green spiraling lights shot from his fingers. They zipped across the room, striking the monster in the back, forcing it to unleash a howl of pain and rage.

The Isaac thing was unsteady on its feet, but it did not fall. Instead, it turned toward Austin with what appeared to be a smile on its face.

Austin held up his hands, examining them, wondering what the hell had just happened. Did those lights come from him? What were they? Could they stop the creature?

That last question was all that mattered as the Isaac thing took a step forward, leaving Alysha safely behind as it moved toward Austin.

Piper took in the world around her as Paige completed the orb. It wasn't the first time she and her sisters popped up in the middle of a storm of trouble, and this one didn't disappoint. A big red and silver demon was fighting off a guy that threw spiraling green laser beams while their Innocent created a fireworks display that was hardly even a distraction. Smashed paintings and broken walls littered the gallery surrounding them all. "This must be the place," Piper said.

"I told you we didn't have time to brew the potion," Phoebe said.

“It’s a good thing *we* did, because we’re going to need it.” Paige nodded toward the spectators taking in the view. Some were cowering in fear in the far corners of the gallery, but most of them were pushing one another out of the way to get the best view as they recorded it for posterity—and for posting later—on their cell phones.

“Not good,” Phoebe said. “Not good at all.”

“One problem at a time,” Piper said. “Let’s start with the demon in the middle of the room.”

Paige sighed. “If I had a dollar for every time we said—”

“Down!” Piper pushed her sisters to the ground as a fireball came their way. It hit the wall behind them, incinerating two ugly paintings of fairies that bore no resemblance to actual fairies whatsoever.

Piper and her sisters were back on their feet in time to watch as the demon grabbed the kid with the laser spirals and blinked out of existence, leaving Alysha behind, along with a few dozen wide-eyed witnesses who all had their cell phones trained on the witch.

“Okay, folks. The evening show is over.” Piper discreetly pulled the three potion bottles out of her bag and handed them to her sisters. “Thank you all for taking part in our little performance art piece. Hope everyone enjoyed it as much as we did.”

Both Paige and Phoebe let out a sarcastic huff behind her.

A thoroughly agitated older man pushed his way out of the crowd. “Performance piece, my ass. This is *my* gallery showing. There was no performance piece scheduled for tonight. And even if there were, I’d never allow such a scene that would destroy my precious artwork.”

Piper nodded toward Alysha, subtly indicating the girl should make her way over to the Charmed Ones. She picked up on the move and took a few slow steps in their direction while the artist raged on about his “works of lyrical genius with a hint of hipster sarcasm.”

“Yeah, okay,” Piper said. “You know what?”

The artist finally stopped babbling and waited for her to continue.

“Now!” Piper threw her potion bottle, followed by Phoebe and Paige.

The three bottles broke together in the center of the floor as green, blue, and red swirling smoke curled together and wafted over the room.

“Alysha, come closer,” Paige called.

As soon as the girl was within a couple of feet of the Charmed Ones, Paige held out her hands and created an orb shield. The newest evolution of her power protected all four of them in a translucent light blue bubble that kept the memory potion from affecting them.

“That should wipe their memories of everything that happened tonight,” Piper explained to Alysha.

“What about the cell phones?” Alysha asked. “Do you have a potion that erases digital images?”

“That would be nice,” Phoebe said. “But no.”

“Once the potion has taken effect I’ll freeze everyone,” Piper said. “Then we can erase all the recordings. Afterward, we’ll escort everyone out, pull the fire alarm, and sneak off in the confusion.”

“Until then, we wait for the potion to clear,” Paige said, hands still raised to create the bubble. “Anybody want to play twenty questions?”

CHAPTER 16

The Isaac thing had Austin in a chokehold and he couldn't get free. Even if he could, he wasn't sure what he could do. The creature was too strong for Austin to fight. Its muscles were nearly crushing Austin's neck and he was pretty sure it wasn't even trying to hurt him. The thing that used to be Isaac smelled slightly of sulfur and something Austin had never smelled before. Its skin felt scaly, scratching him where it met his flesh.

Austin had to concentrate on the creature. He had to find a way out. But all his mind could focus on was the crazy light show that burst from his fingers. Maybe that was the solution. If only he could remember how he made the spiraling lights come out in the first place.

"Stop struggling," Isaac said, his voice deeper and more gruff than usual.

They were back at headquarters, in Isaac's private chamber. It was empty. None of his followers were there, but Austin wasn't sure if that was good or bad.

Austin wondered if there might be a few people in the next room. A new stack of Books of Light sat on the table. Obviously, some of the group had returned to drop them off and restock with other empty ones. If they were in the building he could call for help.

And then what?

What would normal humans with no magical powers do against the creature? Sure, they'd be shocked and outraged that they were following something cut from the same dark cloth as witches—if witches were even

truly a dark power. But what then? Even if someone found Isaac's gun, would it be any use on the thing that held Austin? The muscled arm around Austin's neck relaxed as the creature released him. Austin wanted to run. He wanted to throw his hands out and create those spiraling laser lights, but he didn't know how. He thought of a half dozen things he could try to do to escape, but it was all useless because he didn't know what the thing that held him could do to him in return. The fireballs it used earlier might only be one weapon in its arsenal. Did it breathe fire too? Could it teleport Austin straight to Hell?

"What are you?" Austin asked between gasping breaths. It felt good to take in air again without struggling. Once he got past the initial spasms he breathed deeply.

The red and silver skin began to fade as the hulking beast grew smaller. It blurred slightly as it changed, only stopping once it was Isaac again. The man that had been their leader stood in front of Austin, shirtless and shoeless, but Isaac all the same.

"Sorry about that," Isaac said as he walked over to the closet. "But I wanted to give a good show for the cameras. I figured it would look best if I were in my natural state."

"And what's that?" Austin asked. His eyes flitted around the room. There was only one door. No windows. Why hadn't he noticed that before?

"Demon," Isaac said matter-of-factly as he dressed in a fresh shirt. "But the question I think you'd rather know the answer to is what are *you?*"

"A witch, obviously," Austin said. "But why didn't you tell me sooner? Why aren't you trying to steal my powers?"

"All in good time," Isaac replied. "But you're not a witch."

Austin was going to be sick. "Am I like you? A demon?"

"You should be so lucky," Isaac replied with a laugh. "No. Not a demon. Not a sorcerer. Not a seer. Not a vampire, werewolf, or Frankenstein's

monster. Come on, Austin, you can do it. You were warm when you said you were a witch."

Austin *was* sick. His stomach roiled and he was afraid if he opened his mouth he would vomit what little he'd had for dinner. It was bad enough to find out that he wasn't the person he'd thought he was all his life. He might not be a *person* at all. But that wasn't the truly disgusting part. This was all some kind of game to Isaac. He was taking pleasure in Austin's pain. That was a level of disgusting that Austin couldn't fathom.

"Oh, come now, Austin, you're much smarter than that," Isaac prodded, slipping into a pair of sandals. "If you're not a witch, then you're a . . ."

"Warlock?" Austin whispered.

"Give the boy a prize!" Isaac clapped him on the back so hard that Austin almost did lose his dinner.

"But isn't a warlock just another name for a male witch?" Austin asked.

"You're confusing mythologies," Isaac said. "Or you watch too much classic television. No, a warlock is similar to a witch, but somewhat different. They are unnatural enemies."

"So warlocks are good?" Austin asked, though he was pretty sure he knew the answer.

"Depends on who you ask."

They stared at one another. Austin examined Isaac, looking for some clue to the demon inside him, but only seeing the man. He didn't want to trigger a return of the creature, but he didn't even know if that was a concern. Did the demon force itself out of Isaac's body? Or could Isaac control it, like flicking a switch?

"I have a million questions," Austin finally said. "Will you answer any of them?"

Isaac motioned to the newest stack of books. "Follow me with those Books of Light and I'll consider what I want you to know."

Austin looked at the books. The idea of helping a demon sickened Austin even more, but it was the easiest way to find out more about warlocks and what it meant to be one. It would also help stall Isaac while Austin came up with some kind of plan to escape. It was possible that warlocks were more powerful than demons. If Austin could figure out how to use his power, he could possibly take out Isaac before the demon became a threat again.

"How long have you known I was a warlock?" Austin asked as he reluctantly picked up four of the books. "Since you read my college application essay?"

Isaac laughed as he waved for Austin to follow him. "I knew who you were before you wrote that stupid essay. Discovering you was what led to my plan. This whole thing is really thanks to you, Austin."

"You're welcome."

Isaac glanced back at Austin as he opened the double doors leading to the church. "I appreciate people who can maintain their sense of humor when their world is falling apart. That trait will serve you well should you have a future."

Austin glared at Isaac as he followed him out to the pulpit. "Then you've been planning this for—"

"Years," Isaac said. "It took time to get all the pieces in place."

"Why not just tell me I was a warlock and teach me to use my powers? You could have set up a video camera at any time. You didn't need to involve Alysha. And what's with these books anyway?"

"I had to play things close to the vest," Isaac said, stopping him at the altar. "Couldn't risk anyone knowing what I was up to. And I don't have the time for magic lessons—I needed you to activate your powers when the time was right. The best way to do that was to force it out of you."

"Why?"

“You’re special,” Isaac said.

Austin still felt queasy as he looked out at the empty church. Even if he had called out for help earlier, it wouldn’t have mattered. They were alone in the building.

“So my parents were warlocks too?” Austin asked. “Not some innocent humans killed by a witch?”

Isaac held up a hand. “One moment, please.”

The pile of books was starting to get heavy, but Austin didn’t complain as he watched Isaac raise his arms in front of him, turning his hands so the palms faced up. Isaac’s eyes flashed as all the pews in the church disappeared.

“Much better,” Isaac said. “Where were we?”

“My parents. The witch that supposedly killed them.”

“Oh, yes,” Isaac said as he walked toward the back of the church. “Your father was a warlock. Your mother? Just a weak mortal who married the wrong man. And yes, a witch did kill them. I just left out the part where the witch was defending herself because your father was trying to kill her first. You see, there’s nothing warlocks enjoy more than collecting the powers of witches.”

“Like we’re doing?” Austin asked as he followed him across the now-empty nave.

“*Exactly* as we’re doing.” Isaac opened a door at the back of the church. It was some kind of small storage room filled with wooden pedestals. They looked like music stands. Isaac stepped into the dark room and emerged with two pedestals in each of his hands.

“So why not team up with warlocks? Why go to all this trouble?”

“Who said I wasn’t working with warlocks?” Isaac said as he walked to the front of the church. “Although I wouldn’t consider it a ‘team-up.’ Neither would they.”

“Then if you’ve already got warlocks on your side, why me? I don’t even know what to call the power I have.”

“I don’t care about your power,” Isaac said, placing a pedestal on the floor several feet in front of the altar. “I care about *you* . . . your line.”

“My line?” Austin asked. “What line? I don’t have any relatives on my father’s side.”

“Exactly,” Isaac said. “You’re the last. Not even one of those distant cousins I mentioned earlier.”

Isaac indicated that Austin should put one of the books down on the pedestal that he’d just positioned. It took some maneuvering, but Austin was able to slide the bottom book out of the pile and rest it on the stand. Isaac then motioned for Austin to open the book. He did as instructed. It didn’t seem to matter which page he opened it to. The red writing meant nothing to Austin; it didn’t even look like a recognizable language. He wondered when Isaac had trained the others to read that language. Austin had received no such lessons, but then Isaac had already said that he wasn’t much for teaching.

But Austin’s mind wasn’t really focused on the books. There was something nagging him. Something about families. It didn’t take long to make the connection. “Are you telling me that there was a warlock on the jury in the Salem witch trials?”

“Close,” Isaac said as he put down the next pedestal. “It’s a little more complicated than that, Austin *Herrick*.”

Austin placed the book on the second pedestal. “Am I supposed to understand why you’re saying my last name like that?”

Isaac positioned the next stand. “Well, now, that’s another little surprise. You don’t actually descend from the family of the jurist that condemned all those witches to death.”

“You faked those genealogical charts you showed me?” Austin dropped off the next book. “But how? I don’t know much about my dad’s family, but I know the name goes back centuries.”

“Indeed it does,” Isaac said as he placed the fourth stand. “It is an old, old family. And many centuries ago the head of that family took in an orphaned child. He gave the child his name. You happen to descend from that very child.”

Austin held tight to the last book in his arms. “You’re saying a member of the jury that tried and convicted women for witchcraft adopted a baby warlock?”

Isaac laughed. “Not knowingly. The misguided fool thought he was taking in the child of a friend. The child of a man killed by the only true witch ever burned during the Salem witch trials. You are the last living descendant of the warlock who caused that witch to be condemned to her death. You are the great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson of Matthew Tate, the one warlock inextricably tied to the most powerful line of witches the world has ever seen. His blood runs through your veins. And that is exactly what I need to battle the Charmed Ones.”

CHAPTER 17

Paige orbed into Prue's home on the Nexus and had to steady herself to stay on her feet. Orbing with her sisters and an extra passenger wasn't the problem. She carried people along with her all the time. It was the Nexus itself. It was moving. The floor was tilting. "What's going on?"

Piper clung tight to her as the floor dropped. "Hold on!"

Paige held on to her sisters and Alysha as the floor shook and fell, bounding about like an earthquake. The small sculptures and artwork that Prue had re-created fell from their shelves. The picture the kids painted for her nearly slipped off the wall. Paige and her fellow travelers managed to keep to their feet until the movements stopped.

"Everyone okay?" Piper asked.

"I thought you were taking me someplace safe," Alysha said.

"So did we," Paige agreed.

Piper was already off, moving from the living area to the rest of her sister's magical home. "We need to find Prue and find out what's happening."

Phoebe was after her in a flash. "Hold on, Piper! We should stay together!"

Paige grabbed on to Alysha. "Phoebe's right. We shouldn't split up. Let's go."

"Out of the frying pan and into the frickin' fire," Alysha said as they followed.

Prue's magical home on the Nexus didn't shift or jolt as they made their way through the rooms, but the damage was already done. Pictures had fallen, furniture had slid into the middle of rooms, and the rugs were bunched into piles. But more was out of place than just the items that filled the house. Walls were coming apart, sections of the ceiling were missing, and floors had rippled so it was like walking through a fun house as they searched for their sister, with Piper calling out the entire time.

"Prue! Prue!"

"In here!"

"That doesn't sound like a *Prue,*" Alysha said.

"That's Cole," Paige explained as they hopped over a pile of debris on the floor.

"And Cole is?"

"A long, *long* story." Paige grabbed Alysha's hand again. "Come on."

They found Prue and Cole in a room that had to be the master bedroom. Paige had never seen it before, but it was a sight to behold. It was half the size of Paige's entire house, featuring a separate sitting area with a fireplace and doors leading to a bathroom, a walk-in closet, and a photographer's darkroom. Paige briefly considered whether she and her family were staying with the wrong sister. If it wouldn't have been a pain to orb Henry and the kids around the world, she would have asked to stay.

The room centered on a king-sized bed where Prue was almost lost in the bedding. They were in the veritable calm at the center of the storm. While the rest of the house was in shambles, littered with debris, the master bedroom seemed relatively at peace. The same could not be said for Prue.

The eldest Halliwell sister was tossing and turning, twisting herself in her sheets. She was sweating and seemed to be fading in and out of consciousness. Her eyelids flittered and she could barely focus when they were open.

The tattoos on her arm had nearly faded completely.

“Prue!” Piper cried. “Prue, are you okay?”

Phoebe looked to Cole. “What happened?”

“It’s the imbalance of power,” Cole said. “It’s affecting her and the Nexus.”

“It’s this bad?” Phoebe asked. “How delicate is this place? It’s only a handful of witches.”

“No . . . more . . . dozens. . . .” Prue said. “Spreading . . . all over . . . Northeast. . . .”

Piper placed a hand on her sister’s forehead. “It’s okay, Prue. We got it. This is more of an attack than we’d originally thought.”

“Sounds like it’s getting bigger,” Paige added.

“This demon obviously has more minions than we’d anticipated,” Phoebe said. “Beyond this Austin kid and the others that attacked the coven.”

“Austin!” Alysha dug around in her purse. “He gave me this.”

Paige took the folded piece of paper. She opened it to reveal writing in some ancient language she was unfamiliar with. The ink was red as blood. “This isn’t . . . ?”

“Blood?” Cole took the page from her. “Not quite. At least, not entirely. It would take forever to write an entire book in blood. The blood would dry too quickly. You’d have to keep dipping the pen.”

Alysha whispered to Paige. “Um . . . He knows an awful lot about writing with blood.”

“Former demon,” Paige replied. “Part of the long story.”

Cole held the page up, examining it closely. “But there’s definitely blood in the writing. We’ll need to use magical means to learn more.”

Paige grabbed the paper. “The spell Prue and I used earlier should work.”

Prue moaned as her body twisted. Something in the hall crashed, but the bedroom remained calm. “It’s happening . . . again. . . .” Prue said. “Spreading.”

“How can they be attacking so many witches with one book?” Cole asked. “Even if they’re teleporting all over the East Coast, it’s got to take time.”

“There’s more than one book,” Phoebe explained. “They had at least six in the woods. There may be more.”

“There are probably more,” Piper added.

“I’ve seen that book,” Alysha said. “It’s pretty big. If there are more of them . . . that’s a lot of blood.”

“Yes,” Cole agreed. “It is.”

A collective shiver ran through the group.

“We need to figure out who this demon is,” Phoebe said. “I only got a glimpse of him before he blinked out, but he was red and silver. I think he had horns.”

“We collected a video,” Paige offered. “From one of the witnesses’ phones before we erased it. It’s not very good.”

Cole watched the jumpy video. He shrugged an apology. “The Underworld’s a big place. That blur could be anyone.”

“I could draw him,” Alysha said.

Paige smiled. “Of course! We have our very own forensic artist! Hey, maybe I will start that witch-scene investigation team.”

“I’ll need a sketchbook and some colored pencils,” Alysha said.

“On it,” Prue said weakly. She closed her eyes and concentrated. The art materials appeared, growing out of the top of a desk on the side of the room.

“That’s convenient,” Alysha said as she went for the sketchbook.

Paige held up the sheet of the Book of Light. “I’ll go take care of this. Find out whose blood it is. If it belongs to the demon, we could use it to vanquish him. Piper, I’ll need some help.”

“I’ll come too,” Phoebe said.

“No,” Paige said. “You stay with Prue. Keep an eye on her.”

Phoebe’s eyes weren’t on Prue at the moment, but Paige knew it was for the best. Piper needed to be separated from Prue to be effective, and Phoebe could use a bit more bonding time with her new, old friend.

Paige didn’t wait for arguments before leaving the room.

Piper watched as Paige crushed basil in a mortar. “I realize this isn’t the best time, but do you know who’s covering the dinner shift?”

Paige stopped what she was doing to give her sister a meaningful look, but Piper wasn’t sure how to define it. “What?”

“You were the one who was in this morning,” Paige said. “Why don’t *you* know who’s on schedule tonight?”

“I have been kind of occupied lately,” Piper reminded her.

Paige put down the pestle. “I know, Piper. You’ve got Prue back. I can’t imagine what that’s like, considering the bond you two share. But she’s back for me, too. I finally have the chance to get to know her. And she’s back for Phoebe, whether or not Phoebe’s ready to visit here when the world isn’t falling apart. It’s a miracle. Like, a literal definition of one. But our lives can’t stop entirely for her.”

“She’s trapped in this place,” Piper insisted.

“And that’s not fair,” Paige said. “But when has the magic ever been fair? Is it fair that your life finally settled down enough for you to open your dream restaurant only to find that now you barely have time to run it?”

“I think you’ll agree that Prue’s life is a bit more important than fulfilling my dream,” Piper said.

Paige picked up the pestle again and continued crushing the basil. Her eyes were focused on the mortar, avoiding Piper. “Is it? Would Prue want you to give up on your dream for her? And what about Prue?”

“What about her?”

“She’s trapped here. At least for now. Prue’s got to be able to come to terms with that. She has to be able to make a life for herself here on her own. She can’t do that if you don’t let her. At some point you’re going to have to go home. It’s not just your restaurant. Your children need you. Leo needs you. It’s going to be hard on her today. It will be harder next week. Even harder the week after that. It’s not going to get any easier.”

“At some point I’ll start annoying her and she’ll want me gone,” Piper said lightly.

Paige poured the basil into the smoking cauldron. “Phoebe, maybe. But you? Never.”

“You’re right,” Piper said. “I know you’re right. But . . . I’m not ready.”

Paige gave her a good, hard look. “I get that. But it’s not going to happen on its own. You’re going to have to decide to be ready at some point. And some point soon, because that restaurant is going to drive me nuts.”

“It would probably be easier for me if you weren’t so good at the job.”

“I’ll remember that,” Paige replied. “And I’ll make sure to screw a few things up along the way.”

“You do that,” Piper said as the smoke in the cauldron changed from white to red.

“Looks like the spell’s ready,” Paige said.

“Looks like it is,” Piper agreed.

Prue was no longer on the Nexus.

No, that wasn’t right. Her body was still at the Nexus. Her body was never going to leave the Nexus again if the Elders were to be believed. But her mind had gone someplace else. Someplace familiar. The images weren’t clear yet, but she recognized the shadows.

It wasn’t astral projection. That she couldn’t do. It was the first thing she’d tried to help her escape. Being able to send her soul traveling would have solved everything for her. Well, not everything, but it would have helped. She should have known it wouldn’t be that easy.

She was in a vision. The flashes of violence had been expanding to full pictures, moving with sound. This was the first one she’d been pulled into. She finally understood why as the image began to clear.

She was in Salem, Massachusetts, at the tourist trap officially known as the Salem Witch House. It was not her first time there. During her time after she came back to Earth but before she’d reconnected with her sisters, she’d taken a job at the Witch House in an attempt to create a new life for herself. She’d gone by the name Patience back then. Somewhere along the way, they’d stopped calling her that and she became Prue again.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise that the demon was sending people to attack witches here. That’s what had drawn Prue to the Witch House in the first place. Not only did it give her the chance to repair some of the centuries of damage done to the reputation of witches, but it also allowed her the opportunity to meet fledgling practitioners just learning the craft. The place seemed to attract them.

That’s part of the reason it hurt so much to see this particular witch trapped under the spell of the Book of Light a woman with crazed eyes held in her arms.

The witch was named Sarah. Prue had helped the girl cope with her new powers. That they had lost touch in the meantime was only one of the regrets Prue had about her new prison at the Nexus.

Prue reached out to pull the woman away from Sarah, but her arms went right through her without even ruffling her clothes or causing a breeze to blow her hair. Prue screamed, but no one in the room heard the sound, not even herself. She wasn't really there at all. The images only played in her mind, placing her on the scene.

She could only watch as Sarah fell to the floor, her power to move things with her mind gone like all the others.

Gone from Sarah, but not gone into nothingness. The magic was being pulled from her unconscious body, drained from her, by the book. As the pages absorbed the last tendrils of magic, the book slammed shut and the woman with the crazy eyes made her way out.

Only then did Prue come out of the vision.

Her eyes opened to see Cole leaning over the bed. He was saying something to her, but she couldn't make out the words. All she could tell was that her sisters were gone.

Phoebe ran to the master bathroom to search for a washcloth. If Prue had to be confined to the Nexus, she was in the most luxurious prison Phoebe could imagine. Her bathroom featured a huge whirlpool tub and a separate shower with multiple massaging showerheads. The floor was marble and Phoebe could feel heat radiating from it to keep Prue's toes warm on those cold desert mornings in the middle of nowhere. The counter around the sink was large enough to hold every one of Phoebe's beauty products and still have room to double as a baby-changing station in case of emergency. There was even a bidet. It was the bathroom Phoebe had always dreamed of and never imagined Prue would want.

Prue had always been the responsible one. Phoebe was the dreamer. She was the one who longed for the castle in the sky. And yet, here was Prue with the ability to make her home into whatever she wanted and so far, it

wasn’t how Phoebe would have imagined it. As morbid as it was when the place looked like the Halliwell Manor, at least that made sense to Phoebe. Prue had always loved their family home. It obviously had to change because it was keeping her rooted in the past, but is this really what Prue wanted? Or did her design have another motivation? Was she really longing for Phoebe to visit more?

Phoebe found the washcloths in a cabinet to the right of the sink. While she held one under the cold water to get it nice and cool for her sister she gave herself a good hard look in the mirror. She had been avoiding this place, but was it just because of Cole? That would be the easiest answer.

A part of Phoebe still felt odd to have Prue back. She’d mourned her sister and moved—if not *on,* then at least forward. Having Prue back in her life made her feel like a child again, even though she had two children of her own. Even when Grams had been alive, Prue had always acted as Phoebe’s mother. It was strange to feel like she was taking a step back, no matter how genuinely thrilled she was to have Prue in her life again.

And then there was Cole.

That was even more complicated.

She wasn’t in love with him anymore. That wasn’t in doubt. And yet there would always be something between them. But how would they negotiate being in one another’s lives now that they were kind of stuck together as long as he was tied to Prue? One thing was certain: she couldn’t avoid her sister simply because she didn’t want to deal with the hard questions about Cole. She didn’t need to come up with a solution today, but she had to stop punishing Prue for it.

“You okay in there, Phoebe?” Cole called from the other room.

“Coming!” Phoebe realized her hands were nearly ice as she pulled them from the sink. She wrung the cloth, squeezing out the excess water, and hurried back to her sister’s side.

“Sorry,” she said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “Had some trouble finding the washcloths.”

Phoebe pressed the cool cloth to her sister’s forehead. Prue’s eyes were closed and she looked at peace for the first time since they’d arrived. “How’s she doing?” Phoebe whispered to Cole.

“She had another episode while you were in the bathroom,” Cole whispered back. “Another witch had her power stolen from her.”

“I’m so sorry,” Prue said.

Phoebe furrowed her brow. “For what?”

“Can’t stop it,” Prue said. She was straining to speak. “Only see it . . . as happens. Can . . . only send you . . . too late.”

“Shhhh.” Phoebe gently stroked Prue’s forehead with the wet cloth. “It’s okay, Prue. You’ve told us enough. You’ve told us where to go. We’ve gathered some information. We’ll figure the rest out.”

“I saw something . . .” Prue said. “Important.”

“What did you see?” Phoebe asked.

“I . . . don’t remember.” Prue closed her eyes. Her breathing was steady. She looked so peaceful at last that Phoebe was reluctant to bother her, no matter how much she needed to know.

“Got it!” Alysha came running across the room. She showed them two sketches: one that was the demon’s full body and another that was a close-up of his face.

Phoebe took the drawings. “Yep, that’s him. At least from the glimpse I got. Big and gruesome.” She handed the pages to Cole.

“I don’t recognize him,” Cole said. “So I doubt he’s an upper-level demon. I know most of them.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Phoebe said. “Power has been shifting down there while you were gone. He could have risen to a new position.”

“Yeah, but even then, he would have had to start somewhere,” Cole said. “This plan is too big for a lower level. I’d say he’s midlevel: someone with a taste for power and the ability to get more. One of my contacts down there should know him. Care to join me again?” He held out a hand to Phoebe.

She considered the offer. “You planning on visiting Eleazar again?”

Cole’s hand dropped. “He’d be the most logical first stop.”

“Think I’ll pass,” Phoebe said. “You should be fine down there on your own. I trust you.”

“Thank you,” Cole said. It was only two words, but they were loaded with so much meaning.

“Just don’t go promising a private party at Halliwell’s in exchange for the information,” Phoebe said. “Piper will kill me.”

“You’re going to have to tell her about his complimentary dinner soon,” Cole said. “Before he shows up at the door.”

“Don’t remind me,” Phoebe said.

Cole folded the pages in half and slipped them into his jacket pocket. “I’ll go see what I can find.”

As Cole dematerialized, Piper and Paige came into the room.

“Where’s he going?” Piper asked.

“Underworld,” Phoebe replied.

Her sisters gave her a look that asked more than their words could say.

“It’s okay,” Phoebe replied to the look. “I trust him.”

Paige shrugged and joined her sisters on the bed. “Well, if you trust him, I trust him.”

Phoebe nearly fell off the edge of the mattress. “You weren’t like that before.”

“It’s been a long time,” Paige said. “I’ve put the past in the past.”

“We figured out what’s in the ink,” Piper said, breaking the moment and sliding in between Phoebe and Prue. “It *is* blood. Specifically, it’s the blood of a warlock.”

“That’s how this demon is taking magic from witches,” Paige explained. “He’s not partnered with warlocks. He’s using them. A *lot* of them, by my estimate.”

Alysha gasped. “Austin? Is he a warlock? Is this demon going to kill him?”

“We’ve got time,” Piper said. “The ink isn’t just blood. It’s more of a potion mixed with blood. As far as we can tell, it takes time to . . . to bleed the warlock for this particular magic.”

“Oh my Goddess,” Alysha said.

Phoebe pulled Paige aside. “Do we even know that Austin’s not a willing partner?”

“I looked up the magic necessary to do this,” Paige said. “Trust me. It’s not something anyone would agree to.”

“But what’s the endgame?” Phoebe asked. “What happens to the magic? Is it bound? Does the demon take it? Where does it go?”

“Magic!” Prue shouted suddenly. “It’s the magic!”

Piper was at her side, taking the washcloth from Phoebe. “Yes, Prue. It’s the magic. We have to figure out where it goes.”

“Into the books,” Prue said. “The magic is absorbed in the books.”

“So it still exists!” Paige said. “There might be a way to return the powers to their rightful witches. All we have to do is find the books.”

“And how do we do that?” Phoebe asked. “I tried to get a premonition from the page, but I didn’t see anything.”

Prue’s scream broke through the conversation. She thrashed about the bed for a moment and then was out.

“Prue!” Piper screamed, shaking her sister.

Prue's head lolled to the side. Her breathing was rushed, but steady. It took some time, but her eyes opened again. "It happened again."

"Quick," Paige said. "Tell us where. I'll orb us there right away. Maybe we can get one of the demon's minions and force him to take us to his leader."

"Too late," Prue said. "Gone."

"There has to be a way to find out about these visions while we still have time to do anything," Piper said. "We can't keep showing up after the fact."

Phoebe took a sudden deep breath. She had the beginnings of an idea. It was crazy, but then half the schemes they'd had over the years had been insane. And most of those had worked. "You know what?" she said. "There just might be a way."

CHAPTER 18

It wasn't Cole's first trip to the Underworld on his own since he returned to the land of the semi-living, but he wasn't about to mention that to Phoebe or her sisters. It was nice to feel their trust again. He'd held that trust on and off so many times in the past—mostly off—that he was afraid to lose it now.

No, not afraid. Something else. Something deeper. He'd felt fear before. Not often. Not for himself, usually. But he knew fear. This was something more intimate. He didn't want to disappoint them. *That* was an unusual feeling. Even when his relationship with Phoebe was at its most intense in the past, he'd never worried about disappointing her. Not really. He may have said that at times, might have even acted like it. But he never really believed it. Not back when he still held on to the demon of his past. This was different. *He* was different.

Existing in a demonic void, neither alive nor dead, for years that seemed endless could change a person. It *had* changed Cole.

But now he had a chance at redemption. The Elders had told him that his soul could be saved. The demon he once was no longer existed. He only had his human self to account for now, and he was going to earn his place in the universe. If he couldn't be by Phoebe's side—and it was pretty clear that would not be happening—he would at least be a friend. He would help the Charmed Ones and Prue and he would find fulfillment in that.

It would be so much easier if remnants of his old life didn't continue to haunt him.

Cole pushed that last thought from his mind as he reached Eleazar's door. This was his second unannounced visit in as many days, but he had come prepared. A quick stop at Halliwell's on his way to the Underworld had given him reason to show up on the sorcerer's doorstep. Hopefully, it was enough to avoid another request for a favor.

Eleazar opened the door in a different smoking jacket than he'd worn the day before, but it was generally the same look. "Cole," he said with a scolding tone in his voice. "I see you haven't learned any new manners since your last unannounced visit."

"My apologies, Eleazar. But I brought you a menu from Halliwell's so you can take a look at what it features in anticipation of your visit."

"You do know we get the Internet down here, Cole?" Eleazar still stood in the doorway, not welcoming Cole across the threshold. It was a stunning breach of etiquette from the sorcerer, which was a message all its own. "I can look that up online."

Cole held out the menu. "Not this one. It's the new seasonal menu. Hot off the presses. You're the first person outside the restaurant to see it."

Eleazar's beady little eyes went wide as he snatched the menu out of Cole's hand and ushered him inside.

"If I see that menu leaked on the Internet before it debuts at the restaurant . . ." Cole warned, leaving the actual threat unspoken. Implied threats were the way to go for the new and improved Cole. No reason to mention anything he didn't plan to follow through on. In this case, it was more than enough.

Eleazar acted horror struck, clutching the menu to his chest as if Cole had just insulted his entire lineage. "Perish the thought! Do you think I am so naive that I do not understand the difference between gossip and inside information? This is a precious sneak preview. I would not spoil it by sharing with the unwashed masses."

Cole sat on the plastic-covered couch. “I was hoping you’d feel that way.”

Eleazar reluctantly placed the menu on a side table as he sat in his antique chair. “Ah, here comes the pro quo for your quid.”

“What?”

Eleazar shook his head in resignation. “What is it you want to know now, Cole?”

Cole took the sketches out of his jacket and unfolded them slowly. Building anticipation was all part of the game with Eleazar. The sorcerer was leaning so far forward he was about to fall off his chair, until Cole finally handed him the pages. “I’m looking for a name.”

Eleazar studied the pages intently, starting with the close-up, which was on top when Cole handed them to him. The sorcerer shifted between the pages, back and forth. He paused to consider the likeness, then resumed shuffling between the two. This was as much a part of the show as when Cole had slowly handed him the sketches. For a brief moment, Cole longed for the time when he had just reached out and choked the information he needed from someone. But again, that was a different time and this was a different Cole. The demon was gone, and so was the darkness.

Eleazar sat back in his chair, raising his eyes to the sky as if he were thinking. The show continued. If he didn’t know the identity of the demon in the sketch, he wouldn’t have drawn it out. He wouldn’t make Cole wait for no information. If that were the case, Eleazar would already be making arrangements for a favor in exchange for finding out what Cole wanted to know.

“You recognize him?” Cole asked, hoping to move things along.

“Possibly,” Eleazar replied. “The horns have a familiar look to them.”

“More telling than fingerprints,” Cole said.

“And equally as unique,” Eleazar agreed. He pretended to think just a bit longer before returning the sketches to Cole. “His name is Izax. Midlevel demon. He can only teleport and throw fireballs, but he makes up for what he lacks with impressive schemes. He’s one of the rare demons that can think several steps ahead and endlessly plot before putting their plans into action. Never accept a challenge from him for a game of chess. You’ll lose, but it will likely take a decade to do so. The downside is that sometimes his plans are too complicated for his own good. He relies on others to do the dirty work when it would be more direct to just do it himself, and once the plan is in motion all that patience quickly runs dry.”

“That sounds like our demon.” Cole began to rise. “Thank you, Eleazar.”

The sorcerer held up a finger, wagging it at Cole. “Ah, ah, ah. That’s not all that I know of this demon.”

Cole quickly resumed his seat. “I do apologize. It’s just—time is of the essence.”

“Isn’t it always?” Eleazar said. “Still no excuse for poor manners.”

“Consider me properly chastised,” Cole said, dipping his head as if he felt shame.

Eleazar tented his fingers together, drawing out his response again. “There have been rumors—nothing substantiated, mind you, but rumors all the same. Over the past few years, warlocks have gone missing. Many, many warlocks. No one knows for sure, but Izax’s name has come up as the possible cause. *Some* think he might be making a move. Attempting to become an upper-level.” Eleazar leaned back in his chair with a satisfied smile. The performance was over.

Cole waited an appropriate beat before speaking. “That *is* useful information, Eleazar. I appreciate it.”

The sorcerer picked up the menu again. “Tut-tut. It was a fair trade. I’m just glad I could meet my end of the exchange.”

Cole put the sketches in his pocket. One performance was over. It was time for a new act. “Speaking of exchanges.”

Eleazar smiled over the menu. “I was wondering if you would bring that up. Don’t think I didn’t notice you failing to mention it when your former paramour was here.”

“You do pick up on everything.”

Eleazar put the menu back down on the side table and got out of his chair. He crossed over to a bookcase and pulled a couple of volumes off the shelf. “I keep these hidey-holes around here for instances such as these. You’d be surprised how many people come to me with their secrets.”

Cole watched as the sorcerer waved a hand over the empty space in the shelf and a small wooden box suddenly appeared. “As you said, you know the different between gossip and—”

“Yes, yes, yes, I’m quite quotable,” Eleazar said as he handed the box over to Cole. “You know, I have been holding on to that a bit longer than I’d expected.”

“I’m so sorry you were inconvenienced by my death,” Cole said. “I promise it won’t happen again.”

Eleazar eyed Cole, checking to see just how far he could go in requesting another favor in exchange for property storage. Cole was sure to fix his expression in the way that sent the right message. He’d already done his trade for this particular favor and was not about to renegotiate the terms after the fact.

After a brief beat, Eleazar smiled. “See that it doesn’t.”

Cole exchanged a bit more mindless banter with Eleazar so the sorcerer would not be offended with him for leaving as soon as he had what he’d come for. Cole knew there wasn’t much time, but it would go a long way

toward earning Eleazar's respect should he have information for Cole in the future. He even dropped a little gossip about Paige having to stay with Piper a bit longer while unexpected repairs continued to crop up at her house. It was fairly innocuous information Eleazar could spin into a tale of discord in the lives of the Charmed Ones. The tradeoff was that it allowed Cole a chance to say his goodbyes.

Once Cole was back outside the odd home, he didn't wait to open the box he'd been given. Doing so in front of Eleazar would have been taken as an insult, a lack of trust. It wasn't that Cole didn't think the object was inside the box—though he had some doubts—it was just that he'd been so long without it that he couldn't wait to lay his eyes on it again.

The glow from inside the box forced him to take a moment to adjust his eyes in the dark cavern. Once he was accustomed to the light, he could make out the shape of the white orb.

His father's soul was once again in his possession.

Cole had taken a risk leaving the soul with a demonic sorcerer for safekeeping. If anyone in the demon community knew of its existence, it would have made for a tempting prize to hold over Cole. Even without his demonic powers Cole was still a force to be feared in the Underworld. His connection to the Charmed Ones also made him a target. It was best to get out before anyone came after him.

Cole reluctantly closed the lid on the box, sealing his father's soul back in its container for now. One day he would find a way to free his father's soul and help him move on to where he was meant to be.

It was too early to ask the witches in his life for a favor that big. He didn't want them thinking he was anything like Eleazar, only helping people when they helped him in return. Obviously, he didn't have much in common with the gossipy sorcerer, but Cole felt that he still had to prove that he was in this for altruistic reasons first.

The exchange that concerned him the most was for his own soul and the promise of an eternal reward once the Elders were content that he'd made up for his past. Until then, his father's soul would have to remain hidden. Hopefully, neither would have to wait for long.

CHAPTER 19

“I knew this wouldn’t work.” Piper threw the crystal down on the map in frustration. The last time Prue had been lucid, she’d managed to conjure up a map of North America so that Piper could try scrying for the demon. Since the demon’s mortal followers had concentrated their efforts on that area, it seemed likely that was their base of operations. It was a long shot, because she didn’t have any personal items belonging to the demon or any connection to the warlock, Austin, but it was better than doing nothing.

The problem was that the demon could have easily set up shop in the Underworld. Or, if he were on Earth, there were dozens of spells he could use to cloak his location. It would have been nice to think the Nexus could have amplified their magic, but Piper couldn’t tap into it at all. It didn’t give her a lot of hope for her sister’s plan.

Phoebe came up behind Piper and rubbed her shoulders. “It was worth a try. I’m not sure my plan will work either, but we’ve got to do whatever we can.”

“Where’s Cole?” Piper asked. “Isn’t this a long time for him to be gone?”

“If he’s seeing the person I think he went to see, we might not expect him back for a while. The guy’s kind of chatty. You’d like him, actually.” Phoebe continued the massage, which made Piper suspicious. She had a feeling that they’d moved past comfort to something else.

“I’d like a demonic sorcerer?” Piper asked.

“Ohhh . . . we don’t focus on the demonic part,” Phoebe said, continuing the massage. “He’s really a sweetheart. A little bit of a gossip, maybe, but his intentions are good. You’ll see when you meet him.”

“And *when* will I have a chance to meet him?” Piper asked.

Phoebe’s hands stopped their work. “Not quite sure,” she said. “But he should be calling for a reservation soon.”

Piper batted her sister’s hands off her. “*Reservation?*”

“It was the only way we could get information out of him,” Phoebe said quickly. “He only does favors in trade. It’s not like we had a lot of time to come up with alternate options.”

Prue moaned from the bed as if to underscore Phoebe’s comment. She only thrashed for a few seconds this time before going still. Paige wiped her forehead with the newly freshened cloth she’d run off to get. Piper wasn’t sure the wet cloths were doing anything, but it at least made them feel useful while they watched their sister be tormented by this place.

Piper sighed. “I’m guessing this is going to be a free meal?”

“I *may* have said something about a tasting menu too,” Phoebe replied.

“Should I just open up the wine cellar to him too?” Piper asked.

“You don’t have to,” Phoebe said. “Although it would be a nice gesture.”

“While we’re at it,” Paige added from the bed, “I made the same promise to Henry’s investigator friend that got us the police report on Alysha’s attack. He’s just coming over from Haight-Ashbury, not the Underworld.”

“I’m so glad I finally opened my dream restaurant,” Piper said. “How did we ever survive years of demon fighting without it?”

“I’ve got the name of the demon,” Cole said as he entered the bedroom.

Piper slapped Phoebe’s massaging hands away. “What took you so long? And why didn’t you just teleport directly into the room?”

Phoebe shook her head in resignation. “What she meant to say is ‘Thank you, what did you find out?’”

Piper shrugged off Phoebe’s comment. She’d actually meant what she’d said. Prue didn’t have time to wait.

“I had to make a stop on the way to see Eleazar to pick something up,” Cole said. “And . . . I don’t just pop in to women’s bedrooms unannounced.”

Piper had a host of comments ready for that last part, but it was not the time for quips. “You have information?”

Cole opened up the sketches. “The demon’s name is Izax. Midlevel. A patient schemer, but apparently quick to act once the plans are in motion. Armed with fireballs and your typical teleporting abilities.”

“Likes?” Phoebe asked. “Dislikes?”

“Phoebe,” Piper warned.

“What? My readers put more info on their online matchmaking sites,” Phoebe said. “Still, it’s something.”

“You’re right,” Piper admitted. “Thanks, Cole. We do appreciate it, but that took up more time than it was worth. Prue’s getting worse and I’m not sure Phoebe’s plan will work if we wait much longer.”

“You have a plan?” Cole asked.

“Maybe,” Phoebe said. “But it’s risky with Prue in the condition she’s in.”

“Risky is nothing new to the Charmed Ones,” Cole said.

“Aren’t you sweet?” Paige said with more than a hint of sarcasm. “Prue’s awake again. If we’re going to do it, we’ve got to do it now.”

“And what is it we’re doing?” Cole asked.

“You’re doing nothing,” Piper said. “*We’re* going to unite the Power of Three with the power of the Nexus and see what happens.”

“Hopefully it won’t be fireworks and destruction,” Paige added.

“Did someone say fireworks?” Alysha yawned as she came into the room. She was dressed in casual clothes that she’d borrowed from Prue’s magical closet.

“I thought you were resting,” Phoebe said.

“Who can sleep with the world falling apart?” Alysha said. “I’m here to help. What can I do?”

“Leave,” Piper said. “And take Cole with you.”

Alysha looked to the former demon. “Should we be offended? ’Cause I’m offended.”

Phoebe rolled her eyes in Piper’s direction. “What my sister means is that we don’t know what’s going to happen when we cast this spell. Maybe nothing. Or maybe we’ll blow up the room we’re in. Either way, it would be best if you and Cole were a safe distance away.”

Alysha took Cole by the arm. “Got it. We’ll go see if this place has cable.”

Cole pulled away from her. “It does. And satellite. And various streaming options.” He turned to Phoebe. “Exactly how risky is this plan?”

Phoebe shrugged and pushed him toward the door. “Won’t know until we try it.”

“Be careful,” Cole warned all of them.

“When aren’t we?” Paige said. “Know what? Don’t answer that.”

Before the door was shut, Piper was beside Prue’s bed. “Are we sure she’s strong enough to do this?”

“I’m fine, but we should start before there’s another attack.” Prue pushed herself up into a sitting position. Piper could see her sister straining, but didn’t say anything. If Prue said she was okay, there would be no talking her out of it.

“Grab hands,” Phoebe instructed as she held out her own hands to Paige and Prue.

Piper climbed onto the bed and took Prue's other hand. She reached across her sister's body to take Paige by the hand as well. Their circle wasn't quite round, but it would have to do. She waited for Phoebe's nod and then the four sisters began to chant together.

The Power of Three and Nexus of All,
Hear our cry and answer our call.
Unite our powers, help us prevent
The attack on our next Innocent.

Piper felt a shiver ripple through the group as they repeated the chant. The shiver grew into a shake as their bodies connected and their powers became one with the magic of the Nexus.

Images blurred through Piper's mind. Orbs mixing with people, combining with flame. Piper knew without speaking that her sisters were seeing the same things. None of it made sense, but it felt right. It felt natural.

She was one with Prue. And Phoebe. And Paige.

And for a brief moment, they were one with the Nexus.

They were in the Heavens and the Underworld. In every part of Earth. They were one with witches and fairies. They touched leprechauns and giants.

The Power of Three was there as well. Stronger than before. United with a power unlike anything it had known.

But the darkness was there too. They felt the warlocks and demons, the seers and sorcerers. It twisted into the Power of Three, fighting against it as the Nexus tied them together. Light and dark filled their souls.

They saw the future: A man and woman that matched the description of the attackers who stole the powers of Natalie and Charlene. They each held a duplicate copy of the so-called Book of Light. They were chanting at a

mother and her young daughter in a small apartment that looked like it had been built in the early part of the twentieth century. The girl was screaming. The mother, trying to calm the child.

When Piper opened her eyes, she was there.

And the world was frozen.

Paige hadn't intended to orb herself and her sisters to their destination, and yet she had done just that. The Power of Three combined with the Nexus had taken over and sent the Charmed Ones where they needed to be. The mother and daughter she had seen in the vision were cowering in the corner. The man and woman with the books had just busted through the door. The Books of Light were still closed. They hadn't begun their chant yet. They'd tapped into Phoebe's ability to see the future, but they hadn't gotten a glimpse too far ahead. Just enough to stop what was about to happen.

Paige held up her hand, almost expecting Prue to still be holding on, but she was gone. Most likely back at the Nexus. The magic hadn't allowed her to escape from her prison.

Phoebe still held on to Paige's other hand, with Piper on her other side.

Piper stared at the couple, frozen with their two Books of Light. "I didn't mean to stop time."

"And I didn't intend to orb us here," Paige said.

"Well, now at least I'm not the only one who gets hijacked by her power," Phoebe said.

"I hope Prue's okay," Piper said.

"Excuse me," a voice said from the corner. "But can someone tell me what the hell is going on here?"

"Oh," Phoebe said. "Right. We're the Charmed Ones. We've come to protect you."

“Charmed Ones?” the woman asked. She held tight to her child, who had her head buried in her mother’s arm.

“Nice,” Paige said. “I prefer it when we’re anonymous.”

“Good witches,” Piper said to the woman as she helped her back onto her feet. “Like you. We’re here to help.”

“And them?” the little girl asked, pointing to the frozen people.

“Bad people,” Phoebe said, getting down to the child’s level. “Very, very bad.”

“More like misguided. But we’re going to clear a few things up for them.” Piper turned to her sister. “Paige, how about we take them someplace else for our conversation.”

“Nexus?”

“No,” Phoebe said. “Manor. Attic.”

“Good idea.” Paige moved over to the frozen pair and orbed away with them. They reappeared a moment later in the attic of Halliwell Manor. The man and woman were still frozen, though Paige wasn’t sure how long it would last with Piper so far away. “Stay right here,” she told them—as if they had any choice—and returned to her sisters.

“ . . . they won’t be coming back,” Phoebe was telling the child when Paige reappeared.

“But keep your doors locked,” Piper was telling the mother.

Paige took her sisters by the hand again. “Nice meeting you both,” she said to the mother and child before orbing them away. “Sorry to bother you.” They reappeared together back in the attic a moment later. Coast to coast and back in under ten seconds.

“Wish we had some of that memory potion left over for the little girl,” Phoebe said. “She’s probably going to have nightmares for weeks.”

“At least she and her mother still have their powers,” Paige said, looking over the frozen pair of witch hunters in their attic. “What are we

going to do with these two?”

“Get the books,” Piper said.

“Are these things safe to touch?” Phoebe cautiously approached the frozen pair beside Paige.

“Why risk it?” Paige said, holding out her hands. “Books!”

The Books of Light that were stuck in their arms broke into tiny orbs, rising above them to disappear. The orbs collected above Paige’s hand, dropping toward her. At the moment the orbs began to coalesce into the books again, Paige pulled her hands away, letting them drop to the floor with a thud. “Oopsy!”

“Paige!” Piper warned. “Are you trying to freak out our kids?”

“Sorry,” Paige said. “But, seriously, they should be used to strange noises coming from the attic by now.”

Phoebe nodded in agreement as she turned to Piper. “Okay, unfreeze them,”

“Do we have to?” Paige asked. “I kind of like them better this way.”

“If only.” Piper waved a hand in front of the pair and stepped back, along with her sisters. They watched as the couple jolted, took in their surroundings in shock, and made the mental calculations of what had happened.

Paige saw them eyeing the books by her feet. “Don’t even think of it,” she said. “You’re outnumbered and outmagicked.”

The woman pointed at them. “Witch!”

Paige laughed. “Is she serious?”

“Yes, we’re witches.” Piper took a step forward. The pair countered by taking a step back. “We figured if you were attacking our kind, maybe it was time we all had a chat.”

“It’s the Charmed Ones,” the man said.

“Oh?” Phoebe asked innocently. “You know us too?”

“The descendants of the witch our ancestors burned at the stake?” he replied. “Of course I recognize you.”

Paige held up a finger. They reacted to that too, probably expecting her to turn them into toads with a single point. She would have laughed if the situation weren’t so serious. “Minor clarification: the *only* witch you burned at the stake. All the rest were powerless women that your ancestors burned or hung or drowned.”

“Did they drown them?” Phoebe asked. “I thought the water thing was just a test. Or was that just apocryphal?”

“Well, Melinda was burned,” Piper said. “We know that much.”

“I think the rest were mostly hung. Or hanged.” Phoebe replied. “And there were some men too.”

Paige held up her finger again when she saw the couple trying to take a step toward the exit. “Ah, ah, ah. We’re not done with you yet.”

The woman crossed her arms. “If you must know, most of the suspected witches were hanged. One was pressed. Melinda Warren was an outlier. And, yes, there were men involved as well.”

“Yeah,” Phoebe said. “We know our history. Don’t need a lesson from you. We were actually doing a comedy bit. It usually breaks the tension.”

Piper took another step forward, which they countered. “While we might not need a lesson on the witch trials, you two definitely have to learn a few things about witches.”

“Is this where you try to convince us witches are kind and good and only help protect the innocent?” the woman asked snidely. “You’re almost as bad as Charlene with her witch propaganda. I’ve had to live down the ridicule of what my great-times-seven-grandfather did my entire life because the less enlightened were foolish enough to believe that witches aren’t real. You’re not going to convince me that witches aren’t evil now that I know for certain that he convicted at least one real witch.”

“That’s some messed-up logic there,” Paige said. “And, really? People are still making fun of you for something that happened centuries ago? And the message you take from that is to double down?”

The man grabbed his partner’s arm. “Emily, don’t argue with the witches.”

Her face went wide with anger and fear. “Don’t tell them my name! Jacob!”

“Can it!” Piper said. “We don’t care about your names. Without these books you’re not much of a threat to us. We’re more interested in the demon you’re working with.”

Emily scoffed. “Demon! As if we would make covenant with the devil. *You* are the ones that couple with demons.”

“Who *is* this woman?” Phoebe asked. “Is she stuck in some kind of language time warp?”

Jacob shook his head in resignation. “I know. She’s a bit . . . dramatic. But we’re not working with demons. We are trying to rid the world of your type of darkness.”

“There they go again, lumping us all together,” Phoebe said.

“What are your thoughts on fairies?” Paige asked. “Because those little troublemakers I could understand not liking.”

“And leprechauns,” Piper added.

“True,” Paige agreed.

“Fairies are real?” Jacob asked. “And leprechauns?”

“You guys really didn’t do your research before you started attacking witches, did you?” Piper asked. “Yes. Fairies are real. And witches can be good. But you are most definitely working for a demon.”

Emily sucked in enough air to suffocate the room. “How *dare* you suggest—”

“Knock it off, sister!” Phoebe said. “We’ve got evidence.”

Paige took out her phone and started to move toward Emily and Jacob. They countered each step she took with one in the opposite direction.

She stopped. They stopped.

She took a step. They took a step.

“We’re not going to get anywhere this way,” Paige said. “Piper?”

Piper threw out her hands and froze them again so Paige could close the distance. Once she was beside Emily and Jacob, Piper gave a wave of one hand, only unfreezing their heads so they couldn’t go running off.

Emily screamed. “What did you . . . ? Witch!”

“Yeah, we established that.” Paige held up her phone. “We’re witches. And here’s some video evidence that you’re working for a demon. We downloaded it from the phone of a witness at a gallery where your leader attacked. Recognize him?”

The pair watched the video roll for a moment. Jacob seemed more receptive to the video, but there was still skepticism in his eyes. “You expect us to tell anything from that blurry video? That red blob looks nothing like Isaac.”

“Isaac?” Paige asked. “That’s nice. His real name is Izax. He’s a demon.”

“We do not know that . . . *thing*,” Emily insisted.

Paige continued to hold up the phone. “Give it a second. You might recognize his—”

Emily’s eyes went wide. “Austin!”

“Yep. There it is.”

“Austin’s a demon?” Jacob asked.

“We’re pretty sure he’s a warlock,” Phoebe said. “And maybe being used like you two.”

“We are *not* being used,” Emily insisted.

Paige shook her head. “Piper?”

Her sister put up her hands and Emily's head froze again, along with her body.

"Much better," Paige said as she leaned against the frozen Emily so she could speak with Jacob. "Look, Jacob, I know this is shocking. You thought you were in this to attack some witches—maybe do a little good—only to find out you're on the side of evil. It happens more often than you might think. You would not be the first person in the world tricked into joining the dark side."

"He wouldn't be the first person *in this room,*" Piper added.

"Hey!" Phoebe said. "I'm not the one that was corrupted by Excalibur, of all things."

"Focus, girls," Paige said to her sisters before turning her attention back to Jacob. "The point is, whether you intended to or not, you became a pawn of evil. Like, a really bad evil. And you helped him collect powers from witches so that now he can be even more powerful. It was an accident. We get it. But now you have to ask yourself if you want to help undo the damage that you did. Because I assure you, once Izax collects enough magic to do whatever it is he's going to do, he's going to come after everyone. And you're going to need a witch or three to protect you. So the question is—do you trust that the enemy of your enemy could be your whatever?"

Jacob closed his eyes to think. They were pretty much the only body parts he had any control over. Paige hoped he would come to the right decision.

CHAPTER 20

Phoebe stirred the potion in a counterclockwise direction as a Book of Light orbed onto the kitchen counter beside her. “We got another one!” she called out.

“How many is that?” Piper asked as she returned from the attic with the emergency potion bottles. That was one of the most telling signs that Piper wasn’t spending enough time at home. She usually kept her kitchen fully stocked with everything she would need for cooking and potion making. The fact that she had to run up to the attic and dig around for spare bottles was a concern. To say nothing of the husband and children that had clearly been missing her in spite of the family breakfast they’d had that morning.

“An even dozen,” Leo said as he stacked the newest book on top of the pile on the kitchen table. Now that he no longer possessed magic, Leo was the most logical one to handle the books that carried warlock blood. It was unlikely that any of the tomes could drain the natural abilities of witches without anyone reading the spells, but no one at the Manor was about to risk it. Piper had Paige orb the kids and Henry over to hang out with Coop for the evening as an extra precaution. The goodbyes took up some precious time, as Wyatt, Chris, and Melinda didn’t want to leave their mother after missing her for most of the week.

Phoebe changed the direction of her stirring. The potion she was making was very specific about the preparation. Since they had very little information on Izax, they’d cobbled it together from potions they’d used in the past. They needed it to be powerful enough to take out the demon, but

not so strong it blew back on them in the process. Piecemeal spells like that had to be extra precise. As she counted an even dozen clockwise stirs, she watched as Leo wrapped his wife in yet another hug.

“Now I know how Prue felt all those times I kept hugging her,” Piper said.

“Just getting in what I can while you’re still here,” Leo replied, keeping her wrapped in his arms.

The conversation was lighthearted, but Phoebe could sense the underlying tension. Piper had been gone a lot lately, but Leo couldn’t exactly complain about it, considering his history of being called away from his family by any number of otherworldly entities over the years.

“I’ll go straighten up the living room while you and Phoebe finish the potion,” Leo said. “Don’t want you to think I can’t handle the kids on my own, but their toys are *everywhere*.”

“I noticed,” Piper said with a smile. “But you can stay while we work on the potion. That stuff can wait.”

“Think it might be hard for you to get anything done when I refuse to let you go,” Leo said, finally releasing her from the hug. He gave her a quick peck on the cheek as he left the kitchen.

“I know,” Piper said to Phoebe as they watched him go. “It’s time for me to come home.”

“I’ll visit Prue more,” Phoebe offered. “And Paige. We’ll pick up the slack.”

Piper joined her at the stove. “Are you sure? With Cole there—”

“It’ll be fine,” Phoebe said quickly.

And it would be. Phoebe had spent so much time worrying about spending time with Cole that the reality of being in his presence was nothing compared to the fear she’d had. She *had* moved on. She’d always love Cole to some degree, but it couldn’t compare to the bond she felt with

Coop. Both men had a special place in her heart, but only one of them was her future. She didn't need a premonition to see that.

Piper peeked in the pot. "Looks done."

"Smells done," Phoebe agreed. "And it feels done. I think I'm getting a little woozy here."

Piper placed a funnel into the empty bottle. "These potions should come with warning labels."

Phoebe scooped a heaping ladleful of potion and carefully poured it into the funnel. "May cause drowsiness, nausea, or sudden bursting into flame."

"Do not take if operating heavy machinery or planning to do evil," Piper added.

Once the first bottle was full, Piper placed a stopper in it and put another empty one in its place. Phoebe filled two more bottles with the blue liquid, leaving more in the pot should they fail in their initial attack. She considered stocking up with more, but they were out of anything to hold the potion in, unless they were going to use a sippy cup.

While they finished preparing the bottles, another three Books of Light orbed into the kitchen. "Exactly how many of these did Izax create?" Piper asked.

"And how many warlocks did he kill to make them?" Phoebe said. "Paige better get here soon or we'll have to add one more warlock to the count."

"Can't say the world won't be a better place with fewer warlocks in it," Piper said.

"Yeah, but Alysha thinks this particular warlock can be saved," Phoebe said. "If his powers just went active, he could choose a different path. He's within the forty-eight-hour window, just like Paige was."

"Is that true for warlocks?" Piper asked. "Or is it just witches?"

“I have to hope for the best,” Phoebe said. “He wouldn’t be the first good warlock that we’ve come across. Or good demon. Questionable seer . . .”

“We do meet the most interesting people,” Piper said.

One more Book of Light orbed into the kitchen, followed quickly by Paige. “I think that’s all of them,” Paige said. “If we can trust Jacob.”

“And the other followers?” Piper asked. “Did they give you any trouble?”

“Just the first one,” Paige took a seat and slipped off her boot, rubbing her ankle as she spoke. “He was spooked when Jacob showed up with a witch. Started screaming about betrayal and all that. After that one, I let Jacob take the lead and collect the books for me.”

“What happened to your ankle?” Piper asked.

“Like I said, the first guy gave us trouble,” Paige replied. “He kicked me in the shin.”

“He *kicked* you?” Piper asked.

“He was a little wisp of a guy,” Paige replied. “Probably the only time he ever did anything like that. I orbed him to the roof of the building we were on and that was it.”

Phoebe grabbed a set of tongs and used them to carry the last book to the kitchen table. “And we trust that Jacob gave you *all* the books that were left?”

Paige shrugged. “No, but it’s not like we have a choice. He hasn’t experienced a sudden change of heart about witches or anything like that. He’s just smart enough to realize there was a bigger enemy to fight.”

“Unlike that Emily person,” Phoebe said.

“She’s going to continue to be a problem for witches,” Paige said. “At least, she will once she gets back from Timbuktu.”

“You didn’t!” Piper said.

“I’ll orb her back in the morning.” Paige slipped her boot back on and stood, testing her ankle. “Come on. We’ve got a demon to vanquish.”

Piper handed her a potion bottle. “This *should* take care of him for us.”

Paige placed a hand on each of her sisters. “Next stop: an old, abandoned church.”

“Not creepy at all,” Phoebe said as they disappeared in orbs, only to appear at their destination seconds later. They were in a small, weed-covered courtyard. “Yep,” she whispered. “*Creeeepy.*”

Paige had orbed them behind the building. Even in the moonlight, it was clear that the church had seen better days. The wood was rotted, with several slats missing, but it seemed sturdy enough for the coming battle. Though fairly battered itself, the building had fought the elements for centuries and was still standing.

“Jacob said there was a door in back,” Paige whispered. “Leads into the rectory. Izax is using it as a private office, so if we start there we could take him by surprise.”

“You wouldn’t rather go through the church?” Piper asked.

“Too risky,” Paige replied. “Jacob said he wouldn’t put it past the demon to have set a trap for us there.”

“This whole thing feels like a trap,” Phoebe noted.

“Can’t argue with that,” Paige said as she led them to the back door.

Phoebe walked up the three steps and slowly turned the knob. It wasn’t locked. That didn’t make her feel any better. While she held on to the cool metal, she reached out to see if she could get some kind of premonition to tell her if it was safe to enter. She didn’t receive any insight into the situation.

Phoebe shrugged and waited while Piper got into place. Better to lead with the sister that could blow up demons. Izax didn’t seem to be all powerful yet, so there was a chance Piper’s magic would work on him.

She'd been known to even take out a few upper-level demons with it in her time. Even if it weren't that simple—and they assumed it wouldn't be—she could slow him down while they got into place to use the potion.

Piper raised her hands and gave a nod. Phoebe whipped the door open, spilling a dim light into the courtyard as she braced for an explosion or fireball. Nothing came.

Phoebe peeked around the open door. The room was empty.

"Let's go," Piper whispered as she led the way, hands at the ready to activate her power.

Paige followed next, prepared to orb them out of danger, should the need arise. And Phoebe brought up the rear. Her powers had grown in the past couple of years, but she still wasn't the most active threat of the three. Her levitation had evolved to the point where she could leap tall demons in a single bound—and on one rare occasion she flew. But the most useful skill was also the most dangerous to herself.

Phoebe now could channel people's emotions back at them and use that ability to kill as she had once seen herself do in that same alternate future in which she was burned at the stake for practicing witchcraft. Where Piper and Paige could trigger their abilities to work on a demon from a distance, Phoebe needed to be in close contact and make an emotional connection as well as a physical one. It was dangerous and painful to her, and she promised herself that she'd only use it when absolutely necessary. As she entered the church, she hoped that this wouldn't be one of those times.

"The room looks clear," Piper whispered.

Phoebe didn't sense any immediate danger, but she did feel a presence. Someone in anguish. "We're not alone."

"In the church?" Paige asked.

"No," she said. "Closer."

Her eyes scanned the room as she reached out for the emotions she sensed. She tried to shut down her mind so her thoughts didn't interfere, but she couldn't stop thinking. Sometimes thoughts conflicted with her empathic abilities.

Phoebe had to distract herself, and the best way to do it was by talking out what cluttered her mind. "It's interesting how we're trying to stop a modern-day witch hunt at roughly the same time in history we were supposed to be in the midst of a modern-day witch hunt. I thought we'd stopped this ten years ago. We've been keeping tabs on that prosecutor back home. He's not obsessed with witches. *The Real World* isn't being filmed on the moon. Why does it seem like we're destined to experience this thing?"

"The future's not always easy to change," Piper said. "We know that better than most."

Paige nodded. "Ain't that the—"

"Got him!" Phoebe pointed in the direction from which the emotions were hitting her: rows of empty bookshelves set back into the wall. All three of them moved in that direction.

Paige ran a hand along one of the empty shelves. When she lifted it, there wasn't any dust on her fingers. "I'm guessing this is where Izax kept the Books of Light while he continued to make more of them. Think you're feeling some residual power?"

Phoebe shook her head. "This is too intense to be residual anything. It's worse the closer I get."

"What's that?" Piper pointed to a seam in the center of the wall behind the bookshelves. "A secret room?"

Phoebe pushed at the wall. It didn't budge. "Look for something to open it."

Paige grabbed her sisters and began to orb. "Why waste time?"

The full emotional impact of the suffering hit Phoebe before the orb was complete and she had the chance to focus her eyes on their new location. When she did see what was before her, she wanted to look away.

The young warlock was chained to a wall, hanging by his arms because his legs had obviously given out long before. He was attached to some kind of medieval torture device of metal and gears. But the true horror was the tube attached to his right arm. His blood dripped slowly down that tube, which ran along the machine and continued on to yet another Book of Light. A mechanical pen was at the end of the tube, dancing across the blank page of the book, writing unfamiliar words and symbols in a mixture containing warlock blood.

“Austin!” Phoebe was first to reach him. His head lolled back at the sound of his name, eyes flittering, struggling to open. His skin was cold and pale. “Help me get him out of this.”

“Hold on!” Piper warned. “We don’t know what kind of magic is involved here. Disconnecting him might do more harm than good.”

“We don’t have time.” Phoebe pulled the belt out of her pants and wrapped it around Austin’s arm, pulling it tight before she removed the tube. Once he was disconnected the slow drip changed to a trickle, but it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. She motioned for Piper to get on the other side and they both grabbed him. “Paige!”

Paige held out her hands. “Chains!”

Austin fell forward as the metal chains keeping him on the wall orbed into Paige’s hands. Piper and Phoebe had to hold tight to stop him from falling and taking them down with him. Once they had Austin securely in their arms, they gently lowered him to the floor.

“Austin? Can you hear me?” Phoebe received only a soft moan in return.

“I should orb him to the hospital,” Paige said.

“And tell them what?” Phoebe asked. “He was attacked by a vampire?”

“I’ll just leave him in the emergency room,” Paige said. “They can fix him now and we’ll come up with an explanation later.”

“No.” Austin’s voice was scratchy and weak. “No time.”

“Shh, honey,” Phoebe said. “Don’t talk.”

“Have to . . . stop . . . Isaac.”

“We got that,” Phoebe said. “You need to rest.”

“No . . . blood . . . dangerous.” Austin coughed. It was as weak as his voice. “Made . . . books.”

“It’s okay,” Piper assured him. “We expected as much.”

“My blood . . . different. Stronger.”

“Someone’s getting delusions of grandeur,” Paige said.

“Descendant . . . Matthew Tate.”

The Charmed Ones leaned back in unison. Phoebe nearly laughed when she realized what they were doing. It was as if they were subconsciously trying to put some distance between them and Austin, which was kind of funny.

“It’s okay, Austin,” Piper said. “Matthew Tate wasn’t a particularly powerful warlock. He was just a bastard Melinda Warren trusted. Your blood is no stronger than that of the other warlocks.”

“Besides,” Paige said, “if he was still bleeding you, he couldn’t have finished all three books he needed in order to take us on. So, even better.”

“Not three.” Austin’s head jerked to the side in the direction of the incomplete book. “Four.”

“Prue,” Piper said. “Once he’s done with us, Izax is going to go after Prue.”

“If he gets her magic, does that mean he’ll control the Nexus?” Paige asked. “Suddenly, he’s not looking like too midlevel of a demon.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Phoebe said. “To get to Prue, he’s got to go through us.”

CHAPTER 21

A set of wooden double doors stood before the Charmed Ones. They weren't locked. No one needed to test them to confirm it. What was on the other side of those doors was obviously a trap. Austin had pretty much confirmed it for them. It was possible that Izax wouldn't have counted on them finding his lair so quickly, but if he was really the kind of planner that he was rumored to be, he may have anticipated that occurrence.

It was possible the doors themselves were rigged. Even touching them could set off some kind of magical chain reaction ending with the Charmed Ones losing their powers. Paige had offered to orb them into the next room, but it was just as likely that the use of magic would trigger it as well.

Austin was resting back with Prue and Cole, where Alysha was likely taking good care of him. The color had come back to his cheeks and they'd determined that his recovery would likely be better helped by magical means than medical ones. Unfortunately, Paige's Whitelighter powers to heal were useless against the magic Izax used to drain him of his blood. But maybe something about his proximity to the Nexus and it being a place for the balance of magic for both good and evil might be beneficial. At least that's what they hoped as Paige orbed him away.

Austin hadn't known anything more about what Izax was planning, just that the demon had all the books, including three empty ones written in Austin's blood ready to take the power of the Charmed Ones.

The one bright spot was it seemed like Izax needed a mortal to channel the magic of the warlock blood in the Books of Light. That was the only

way to explain why he'd collected all those descendants of the jurists in the original Salem witch trials. It was a bit flashy when it seemed like any random mortal could do, but Izax was turning out to be something of a showman. So far as the Charmed Ones knew they were now completely alone in the church with the demon.

"This is ridiculous." Phoebe took a few steps back, then ran for the double doors, lifting herself several feet into the air and delivering a powerful kick. The doors burst open, nearly coming off their hinges.

Piper and Paige were beside her the moment she landed in the chapel.

No trap had been sprung. No demon appeared.

They stood beside the abandoned altar. The pulpit was little more than a raised wooden platform.

The pews in the nave were gone too, just as Austin had said they would be. But the room was not completely empty. In place of the wooden benches stood five rows of pedestals laid out in some kind of pattern. The first row had four stands. Behind that, the next row had five, and then another row three. The shape diminished in the same manner with five stands in the fourth row and four pedestals in the fifth. A Book of Light sat open on each of the pedestals, with twenty-one total volumes containing the power of witches from across the area. The pages faced away from the Charmed Ones, but they didn't need to see the blood-red ink to know powerful magic lay before them.

They doubted that the three books intended for them were mixed in among the others. But the question was—where were they? And where was Izax?

The Charmed Ones moved to step down from the pulpit to search the chapel.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a deep, scratchy voice echoed through the church. It came from the shadows in the choir loft, where three

more pedestals with three additional Books of Light stood along the balcony rail.

“What’s with the hiding in shadows?” Paige asked. She and her sisters were careful to stay on the pulpit. “We already caught a glimpse of you at the art gallery. Not like we’re going to be shocked by the big reveal or anything like that.”

“Maybe he’s hiding from us?” Phoebe suggested. “Too afraid to take us on face to face.”

Izax emerged from those shadows with a sneer on his demonic face. He was no longer in his human disguise, revealing his true hulking red and silver body, crazy hair, and horns. “Do you really think you can bait me into letting you beat me?”

“We baited you out of the shadows,” Piper said. “I’d back us in this fight.”

“You are three witches,” Izax said. “Powerful, I grant you. But I have the magic of dozens of witches at my control.” He motioned to the three books in front of him and the others below him as he spoke. “And before you think of throwing any potion bottles up at me”—Izax held his hand out above the balcony rail, and the air in front of him changed to a swirling blue wall of magic—“I’ve protected myself against your potions. And your orbs.”

“He has thought of everything,” Phoebe said softly to her sisters.

“He’s a better planner than he’s been given credit for,” Piper agreed.

“Good thing we’re more the fly-by-the-seat-of-our-pants types.” Paige boldly ignored the demon’s warning and stepped off the pulpit. “Come on, Izax. Hit us with your best shot.”

Piper and Phoebe shared a look, then followed their sister down onto the floor of the nave, bracing themselves for an attack that did not immediately arrive.

Then the chanting began in Izax's deep voice.

When the other witches had referred to a language they didn't recognize, that barely came close to describing the groans emitting from Izax's body. There were no words, not ones constructed in human language. The spell Izax uttered was more a collection of sounds that could only come from a demon. No human would be capable of creating them, which begged the question of how humans did?

A torrent of water burst from a book in the first row. Piper froze it before they could be doused. Paige orbed it outside, where they heard it splash harmlessly on the ground.

"That's the best you can throw at us?" Phoebe asked. "A bucket of water?"

"Don't bait the demon," Piper warned with a glance toward the other books. "He's got plenty of ammunition."

Phoebe rose off the ground. "Oh, come on, Piper. Where's your sense of adventure?" She pulled her potion bottle from her pocket and threw it at the force field. The glass smashed against the invisible wall, reawakening the swirling blue light with an added spark of green. "Now, Piper!"

Below her, Piper raised her hands in Izax's direction, flicking out her fingers in an attempt to make the demon explode. Nothing happened except for the deep, taunting laughter that came from behind the swirling blue.

"It was worth a try," Phoebe said as she floated back to the ground.

Izax emerged again as the swirling blue light dissipated while the remains of the potion trickled down the balcony rail. "My turn."

The inhuman keening began again.

Lightning shot out at Phoebe from another book. She dove from its path as it struck the altar behind her, starting a small fire.

A book in the third row fired thorns at Piper. She froze the pointy little missiles, then ducked out of the way, allowing them to harmlessly continue

into the flames.

The book beside that one produced a lasso of light. Paige dove away from the glowing rope, but it countered the move and wrapped her up. The rope of light continued to grow from the book, twisting around Paige's body, tightening like a boa constrictor, crushing her. "Can't . . . orb."

Phoebe grabbed Piper's arm. "Blow up the book!"

Paige gasped. "No!"

"That's a witch's power," Piper said. "I can't destroy it if there's a chance we can return the magic to its rightful place."

"Either a witch loses her powers," Phoebe said, "or we lose an entire witch. Blow up the book!"

Another book attacked, sending out ice darts. Piper countered by speeding up the molecules and melting the ice. By the time it reached them, it was little more than a fine mist.

Paige dropped to the ground as the rope continued to tighten around her. Phoebe was quickly by her side. She tried to pull the light rope off her sister, but it refused to budge, sending shocks to her hands each time she tugged against it.

"Maybe I can take out the pedestal." Piper held out her hands again and tried to blow up the pedestal the book rested on without harming the book. A small explosion knocked it to the ground. The rope of light held tight to Paige as the source of its origin dropped.

"Nooo!" Izax screamed, reverting to his human tongue.

"Aauggghh!" Paige yelled as she thrashed about on the floor, trying to break free from the rope of light.

Piper unstopped her potion bottle and moved toward Paige, dodging another rope of light as it shot from the book, darting past her and attacking Paige. "I've got an idea."

“What are you doing?” Phoebe asked as she fought against the two glowing ropes tangled around her sister. “That potion was brewed for a midlevel demon, not a witch’s magic.”

“That magic is tied to Izax now,” Piper reasoned. “Maybe we can weaken it. Or him.”

Piper carefully poured a couple of drops on the rope. It sizzled in the spot where the liquid fell.

“More!” Phoebe said. “I think it’s working.”

Reluctantly, Piper spilled the rest of the potion on the ropes. As it made contact, the ropes frizzed and frayed, and the light blinked. Phoebe attacked the area, pulling away the ropes and giving Paige room to breathe. But the ropes refused to break. “Orb, Paige!” Phoebe urged. “While the rope is weak.”

Paige closed her eyes and slowly, painfully, broke her body into orbs. The tiny balls of light slipped out of the rope, rolling across the floor until they slammed against the wall, forming Paige’s body once more. She gasped deeply for breath as the ropes, now empty, tightened into a ball and disappeared.

“Are you okay?” Piper asked as she and Phoebe helped their sister to her feet.

Paige waved them off, standing firmly on her own as a lightning bolt flew toward them. Paige orbed it away, altering its direction and sending it smashing out of the church through a window. “Just getting my second wind.”

The Charmed Ones turned to face the room again, preparing for the next onslaught. The books that had been used in the attack still showed signs of their magic. Water dripped from the first book, while another had sprouted thorns and a third had icicles hanging from its stand. The book on the floor

was wrapped in threads of light, while another crackled with tiny bolts of lightning.

“Why are you playing with them?” a shrill voice shouted from within the shadows of the choir loft. “Finish this! Take their powers!”

Piper thought she recognized that voice. “Emily?”

The woman that they had reluctantly unfrozen revealed herself beside the demon, causing Phoebe to throw a side-eye at Paige. “Timbuktu?”

Paige shrugged. “Demons can teleport too. How was I supposed to know he put a tracking device on her?”

“Or she could have, you know, picked up a phone,” Phoebe said.

“You’ve teamed up with a demon?” Piper shouted up to the loft. “How is that not working with evil?”

“One evil at a time,” Emily said. “Once I get the witches, I can take on the demons. And then beat back any other darkness that exists in the world.”

“You are an idiot,” Piper said, “if you think he’s not going to kill you the moment you’ve served your purpose.”

“Isaac needs me,” Emily said. “He has to channel his magic spells through a human for them to work. You see, even without your unnatural magic, we’re still the dominant species on this planet.”

“His name is Izax,” Phoebe said. “And you’re still an idiot.”

Emily laughed, sounding almost as inhuman as the demon as she stepped up to one of the Books of Light in the choir loft and started to read from it. Izax was chanting along with her, making those guttural sounds again. The pair spoke in unison, with the sounds from Emily coming out more like words but still completely unrecognizable.

“The force field,” Piper said. “One of these books has to be controlling the force field.”

“You don’t think it’s up there with them?” Phoebe asked as the chanting continued from the choir loft.

As her sisters talked, Paige grabbed her stomach. She felt odd. Uneasy.

“Look at how the books on the floor are laid out,” Piper said. “It’s some kind of pattern. Did you hear how Izax yelled when I knocked one off the pedestal? I think the books that are already holding witches’ magic are linked somehow, working together. If we can separate the book that’s creating the force field from the others, we can disrupt it and take out the demon.”

Phoebe looked out at the books. Sixteen still hadn’t revealed their magic yet, but none of those remaining tomes showed any signs of an invisible force field. “But how do we—”

Paige doubled over. “I don’t feel so good.”

Phoebe moved to her side. “Paige!”

“He’s stealing her magic.” Piper grabbed Phoebe. “Get to the books. Move them! Throw them! Do whatever you can!”

“Just don’t destroy them,” Paige said, wincing in pain.

Piper and Phoebe ran from the altar, moving into the rows of books. Phoebe kicked a pedestal out from one while Piper picked another book up and threw it to the back of the room. As she went to pick up a second book, flames burst from the pages, forcing her to jump back. “Phoebe, look out!”

Vines burst from the book Phoebe held, but she was standing beside Paige before they could get her, the final orbs putting her body back together.

“That worked,” Paige said, standing tall and no longer seeming to be in pain at all. “Looks like you distracted him.”

Izax’s voice was the only one chanting spells from the choir balcony at the moment, but not the only one they could hear. “What are you doing?” Emily screamed. “We have to take their powers.”

The hulking demon brushed the woman aside, pushing her back into the shadows. “You want to fight the magic instead of me?” he called down to the Charmed Ones. “So be it. I can take the power from your bodies once you’re dead.”

Izax held his arms out before him and raised his voice, booming loud enough to shake the walls. The noises he made vibrated through the floor as the books below him rose into the air.

“Piper!” Phoebe warned from the pulpit. Her sister was alone in the middle of what was about to become a magical storm.

Piper tried to move toward them, but a glowing book blocked her path. It grew in size until it was a wall in its own right. The other books were coming to life as well—all of them—letting loose with their magic. Fire. Ice. Lightning. Wind. The natural elements and unnatural powers burst out around Piper.

“Freeze them!” Paige yelled. “Freeze the magic.”

“I can’t!” she said. “It belongs to good witches.”

“But it’s being used for evil purposes!” Phoebe said.

“Maybe I can. . . .” Piper closed her eyes and concentrated. She could feel the magic around her, closing in on her. It was too powerful. *Too much.* She couldn’t stop it.

But she didn’t need to. All she had to do was slow it down.

Piper felt her own magic build within her, emanating from her fingertips and flowing out. When she opened her eyes again, she saw that she was at the center of a maelstrom set to slow motion. Vines crept toward her that she could easily sidestep. The fire that rose from another book barely gave off heat as its flames hardly flickered. Above her, Izax continued chanting his unintelligible spells in his booming voice, but the effect was muted on the floor below. She could pick the thorns out of the air as they floated by.

“The force field!” Phoebe said as she and Paige came down from the altar. “Which one is it?”

The Charmed Ones searched the lower level, weaving in and out of the books and the magic they created. Paige moved past a book that had the beginnings of a whirlwind forming from its pages. Piper hopped over a book that had thousands of tiny bugs spilling from it. She assumed it was a projection, as creating actual bugs didn’t seem to her much like the natural power of a good witch.

“I think I got it.” Phoebe stood beside the lone book in the back of the room that had no visible magic coming from it until Phoebe tried to touch it and the book erected a swirling blue shield around itself.

Paige was the first to join her. “Now what do we do?”

The moment Piper arrived, every book in the place went silent again. Evidence of the magic remained with them, but they no longer fought against Piper’s will. She released them from her magic, and those that were hovering all fell to the ground.

Above, they heard Emily’s voice becoming one with Izax’s again.

“No!” Paige doubled over.

Piper looked at the book in front of her. “I have to blow it up.”

“It’s a witch’s power!” Phoebe reminded her. “You were right. Maybe it belongs to Nat. The force field could be some sort of natural progression from her ability to sense danger. It’s a power she hasn’t even learned of yet. How can we destroy it before she has the chance to see what she can do?”

“I know, Phoebe, but you were right too. It’s either Nat or Paige.”

“You can get my magic back too,” Paige strained to say.

“Not if Izax takes *all* our powers,” Piper said.

Paige pulled the last remaining potion from her pocket, cringing from the attack on her. “Still have my potion bottle. Could weaken the shield.”

“If we use the potion against the book, we won’t have it to use against Izax,” Piper said.

“He’s a midlevel demon,” Phoebe replied. “You could just blow him up.”

“He’s channeling enough power for an upper-level demon now,” Piper said. “It’s too risky.”

Paige let out a howl of pain that rivaled the booming voice of Izax mixed with Emily’s. Tiny white orbs rose from Paige’s body, popping in the air above her as her magic was stolen by the duo above.

Phoebe’s eyes met Piper’s. “Do it.”

Piper grabbed the potion from Paige and handed it to Phoebe. “We need to time this right. I’ll get the book while you take out the demon.”

“On it.” Phoebe ran out from under the choir loft and turned so she faced her sister again. She gave a nod and Piper held out her hands. The book swirled with blue light as it fought against Piper’s power. The magic didn’t want to die as much as Piper didn’t want to destroy it. But it had to go. If Paige’s magic was lost, the Power of Three would be gone and Piper and Phoebe would become Izax’s next targets.

The book fought, but it was outmatched. Nat’s stolen magic was nothing compared to the strength of a Charmed One as Piper continued to batter it with a *pop, pop, pop* of explosions. The blue, swirling light spiraled out of existence and the book exploded, sending singed pages around the room.

The resulting boom was a starting pistol, prompting Phoebe to leap into the air, raising herself till she was level with the choir loft. As the demon continued to chant, she threw the potion. The bottle broke against his hulking red and silver body.

Izax ignited as soon as the liquid touched his skin, exploding in a burst of flames that knocked Emily to the floor beside him and blew Phoebe back toward the pulpit.

Phoebe righted herself in midair and watched as the last of the demon dematerialized, leaving silence in his wake.

CHAPTER 22

“What do we do with her?” Paige asked as they stood over the unconscious body of the woman who had decided that teaming up with a demon was preferable to letting witches run loose in the world. Phoebe had seen Emily fall against the balcony rail when Izax’s body exploded, but she’d been unable to do anything about it, since the explosion knocked her back through the air as well.

They’d already confirmed that Emily was breathing. There didn’t seem to be any other visible injuries, aside from the possible concussion. Paige had considered using her Whitelighter ability to heal Emily, but she liked the idea of the woman coming away from this encounter with a bump on the head to remind her that she shouldn’t go around attacking people, no matter who she believed them to be.

“We can’t take her to the police,” Piper said. “There’s no way to explain her crime.”

“Already tried leaving her in a foreign land with no way to get home,” Paige added. “That didn’t work so well. Maybe I could orb her to the Underworld for a while. Teach her what demons are really like.”

“Paige,” Piper warned.

“Kidding! Kidding!”

Phoebe leaned over the woman’s body. She placed her hands on the sides of Emily’s head. “I think I have an idea.”

Piper pulled her away. “Phoebe!”

Paige chuckled. “And you thought leaving her in the Underworld was too extreme.”

“We can’t kill her,” Piper said. “Much as we might want to.”

“I’m not going to *kill* her,” Phoebe said. “But I think I can teach her a better lesson. Give her a glimpse into what her all-consuming hatred of witches is doing to her.”

Piper looked down at the woman, who was slowly rousing. At any moment she was going to start screaming, or hitting. They probably should have checked her for a gun while she was still out. “Are you sure?”

Phoebe shrugged. “Pretty sure.” She took her position on the floor above the woman again, placing her hands on either side of Emily’s head. Phoebe hadn’t known what this power was when she’d had that original glimpse into her future. Back then, in the early days of learning she was a witch, Phoebe had only been able to see the future. In the years since, her premonitions had evolved into empathic abilities, and that had changed into something with the potential for violence. Not only could Phoebe sense people’s emotions; she could use the feelings against them as a weapon. She’d seen herself kill a man with his emotions and then—years later—almost made that vision come true. She used it against a powerful being once, only to be shaken off like she didn’t exist. Now Phoebe wanted to try something in between.

As Emily’s eyes flitted open, Phoebe tapped into the woman’s emotions. She felt Emily’s hatred, mixed with righteous indignation. Emily truly believed she was doing good, but her emotions had twisted it into something evil. For a brief moment, Phoebe touched on the fear at the core of all of that and then turned it around and projected it back into Emily’s mind.

White light emanated from Phoebe’s hands, crackling with energy. The woman screamed—more from fear than pain—as she was hit by her own

raw emotions. Phoebe was careful to filter the strength of the images. Too much and she could kill Emily. Not enough and the lesson would be completely lost on her. The connection was intimate and uncomfortable, and Phoebe ended it the moment she realized it was as much an intrusion as what Emily had done to the witches.

"I'm sorry," Phoebe said as Emily eyed her with fear. "But you needed to know. If you don't stop this, the only person you're going to hurt is yourself."

The woman didn't say a word as Phoebe got up and moved away from her. "Paige, send her home."

Without uttering a word, Paige used her power to return Emily to the place in her mind that she thought of as home. Once she was gone, the Charmed Ones turned away from the choir loft to look down at the destruction wrought below.

The small fire on the altar had gone out on its own. A gentle breeze blew in through the smashed window. The Books of Light littered the floor, dormant now. The thorns, ice, vines, and other manifestations of power had disappeared. The burnt and singed cover and pages of the one destroyed book remained.

"We'll bring it all back to Prue," Piper said. "The Nexus may be able to give her an idea of what we can do to restore the balance. But first . . ." Piper held out her hands and blew up the three Books of Light in the choir loft to ensure no one would ever use them against the sisters. Paige then orbed the remaining bits of the books to various points in the world, scattering the ashes far enough away that they would never be a danger.

The Charmed Ones went back down to the first floor of the church and carefully piled the Books of Light that held the other witches' powers into three stacks on the floor. Paige then orbed the remains of the book Piper had destroyed into its own pile beside the stacks in the hope that some element

of the power that had been stored in the book could be salvaged. None of them wanted to go back to Nat and tell her that she would never be a magical witch again.

They scoured the building to make sure there weren't any other books before destroying the one that had been intended for Prue and scattering it as well. They dismantled the magical machine that Izax had used on Austin. Might as well protect the warlocks too, as long as it also kept witches safe in the bargain.

Once they were sure the building was clear of anything that could be used against witches, they reconvened in the church and orbed to the Nexus with the books.

Prue was on her feet and welcomed them with open arms upon their return. Her living room was back to normal and looking even better than it had before. The children's painting hung straight above the mantle once more.

"You look so much better!" Piper said as she wrapped her sister in a hug.

"There were a couple moments there when things got wonky while you were gone," Prue said. "But overall, the world has stopped spinning and I feel pretty good. I'm guessing these are the books that hold the witches' powers?"

"And one other," Phoebe said, pointing to the remains of the book they'd had to destroy. "The only casualty."

"We were hoping you or the Nexus could do something about it?" Piper said, silently pleading with her eyes.

Prue looked skeptically at the pile of books and then sadly at the remains of the destroyed one. Her powers didn't extend beyond the Nexus, since they weren't *her* powers at all. The only thing she'd done since she became tied to the place was redecorate. She wasn't sure if that was even

considered real magic. It might have all been an illusion. She couldn't stand aside and do nothing out of fear of learning the truth. The Nexus had spoken to her. It had let her know about the attacks and allowed her to feel the pain of loss. It was possible she could be an agent for healing as well.

Prue stepped up to the three stacks of books they had lined up in a row. She could feel the magic coming from them the closer she got. She'd long since learned that anything was possible, so she approached it with a kind of optimism she hadn't felt much recently.

Holding her hands out over the books, Prue reached out to the power of the witches contained within the pages. She felt the darkness in there too, the remnants of the warlock blood stolen to make the horrible books. She felt the evil recede as she connected with the light within the pages.

Prue closed her eyes, calling out silently to that good magic. Her body warmed with an internal glow as she connected with the Nexus and allowed the light magic to wash over her. For a brief, shining moment, she was filled with the power of dozens of witches, becoming the most powerful witch on the planet. Even more powerful than the Charmed Ones. The magic swirled in her body. She could do *anything*.

It was a tempting power, but it wasn't hers. It had to return home. She used this new strength to reach out into the world, touching each of the women whose powers had been stolen from them, and a few men as well. With each person her essence touched, she felt the magic ebbing away, returning to its rightful place. One by one she experienced the joy each witch felt as she regained her abilities. The silent prayers of gratitude came back upon her until the last bit of magic left Prue's body and she was alone with the Nexus again.

When Prue opened her eyes, she saw her sisters staring at her in awe. Piper held another Book of Light that had not been in any of the stacks. "Where did that come from?"

“It’s the book I blew up,” Piper said. “You put it back together.”

“You didn’t know?” Phoebe asked.

Prue reached out to touch the book. It was solid . . . whole. “I could feel the magic flowing through me, but I couldn’t tell you what was happening. It all just felt . . . right.”

Paige threw an arm around her sister. “Looks like the Power of Three has nothing on the Power of the Nexus.”

“I guess.” Prue was both excited and scared by what that could mean.

Prue was surprised to find herself alone in her bedroom when she woke as the sun was just beginning to set over the desert. By the time she’d returned all the magic to its rightful witches, it had grown late in San Francisco. The fight against Izax had pretty much drained them all of their energy, if not their magic. Her sisters had been too tired to make the orb trip home and bother getting ready for bed, so Prue used her magic to extend her bed to twice its size and they had an impromptu sleepover. Sure, the girls could have gone off to the many bedrooms in her new castle to sleep, but this was more fun. Unfortunately, everyone was too exhausted for chatting, ghost stories, or childish pranks. But Prue slept more soundly among her three sisters than she had in a while.

She figured they’d needed to get back home first thing. They all had kids to prepare for school, husbands to kiss goodbye, and their own jobs to get to as well. But Prue had assumed they’d at least wake her to say goodbye before they left.

As she got out of the giant bed herself, she realized it was Saturday morning in San Francisco. Piper’s restaurant didn’t open till later, and Phoebe didn’t have to work at all. Time kind of lost all meaning when one was stuck above a magical Nexus and didn’t have a calendar to answer to.

But still, the kids would probably want to know where their mommies were when they woke.

Prue went to her bathroom to splash some water on her face and brush her teeth. Alysha and Austin would still be around. The young warlock had been healing nicely with a magical nudge from the Nexus, which could apparently do what a part Whitelighter could not. Time would tell if he gave in to the darkness of his warlock heritage, but for the moment he seemed to be on the right path. Prue was pretty sure Alysha had plans to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Cole was probably puttering around somewhere as well, possibly making breakfast if the smells from the kitchen were any indication. Prue made her way toward the delicious aromas.

"What's this?" Prue asked when she saw the smorgasbord of food laid out on the kitchen table and Piper by the stove.

"We made breakfast," Phoebe said as she bit into a strawberry while sitting on the counter.

"*We?*" Piper asked.

Phoebe raised a hand. "Official food taster. It's an important job."

Prue was glad to see that her sisters hadn't left. She took a strawberry and dipped it in the bowl of whipped cream beside it. "It's nice to know some things never change. I've missed you."

Phoebe slid off the counter with a suddenly serious expression. "I'm sorry I haven't been around more."

"It's okay, Phoebe," Prue said. "I understand. You were avoiding my roommate."

Phoebe took her sister's hand. "True. But I think I was avoiding you too. Just a little. It's wonderful having you back, but it's weird too. Like with Cole, I moved on. I had a life. And I feel a bit like I cheated you out of

one. Like I should have found a way to bring you back. Piper took forever to give up on you. She tried everything and then she tried everything more."

Piper stepped away from her cooking. "Phoebe, I was obsessed. It wasn't healthy. And it didn't work anyway."

"But she found a way on her own," Phoebe said, turning back to Prue. "Why couldn't I? If I could see the future, why couldn't I see you?"

"Phoebe, I was a mess back then. I wasn't ready to come back. Not even to visit like Mom and Grams. But I'm better now. I've healed. Accepted who I am—and I'm even kind of happy. I've got you two back in my life, and now I have the chance to get to know Paige. Okay, I'm stuck here. Life isn't perfect. But it *is* life."

"I love you." Phoebe pulled her sister into a warm hug.

"I love you, too," Prue said.

"Oh, and remember your black jacket that a cat peed on and you blamed Piper because you thought she borrowed it? Yeah, that was my fault. I was the one that took it. *Whew.* Been holding that one in for *years!* Feels so good to get it out. Oh, look, Cole's here. Good morning, Cole! Or, I guess it's evening here." Phoebe hurried off as Prue watched her, awash in confusion.

"What is she talking about?" Prue asked Piper. "Black jacket?"

"It's Phoebe. Who knows what she's *ever* talking about?" Piper handed Prue a menu.

"I get that you made more food than we could possibly eat in a week, but why do I need a menu?" Prue asked.

Piper smacked her sister on the arm. "It's not for breakfast. It's for my restaurant. Look at it!"

"Look at . . ." Prue noticed the photo at the top of the menu page. It was a picture of the Golden Gate Bridge she had taken years ago on a day she'd spent alone with her camera around the Presidio. She'd completely

forgotten that day until she saw the results of it in front of her. It was the last time she'd taken an entire day off to go around and photograph the world before she'd died.

"I had it developed after your funeral," Piper explained. "I figured if you can't come visit my restaurant, I'll still have a part of you there always."

"Thank you, Piper," Prue said. "It's the next best thing to being there. But seriously, did you have to bring the entire contents of your restaurant kitchen here? We'll never be able to eat this."

"We're expecting some visitors," Piper said. "Brace yourself. Oh, Paige!"

Two bodies appeared in orbs that eventually formed Paige and an unexpected surprise holding a suitcase.

"Dad!" Prue wanted to run to her father, but fear held her back.

"Prue? Prue, is that . . . of course it is." Victor smiled and pulled her into a hug. "It's so good to have you back."

"Dad?" Her voice cracked. "Dad, it's me."

"I know," Victor said, still clinging to her. "Your sisters explained everything. It doesn't matter what you look like. You're as beautiful to me today as you were for all of your life and beyond. I've got my girl back. That's all I care about."

Prue was too choked up to speak. She'd been putting this reunion off for too long and for stupid reasons. None of it mattered anymore. All the problems she'd had with her dad in the past were wiped away once again just feeling herself in his arms. That comfort remained even once he'd let her go.

Prue wiped away a tear. "You brought a suitcase?"

"I'm here for the week," Victor said. "If I'm welcome."

"Of course you're welcome," Prue said. "I'll add an extra room."

“Good,” Piper said. “Because I have to get back to my restaurant. And my kids.”

Paige began to orb again. “Speaking of which . . .”

She returned a moment later, with many, many more orbs dropping from the air. It was more than just two people. It was more than five. A dozen shapes formed in the kitchen, eventually becoming the entire living Halliwell clan.

“Aunt Prue!” all the children yelled as they ran up to attack her with hugs. A sea of kids surrounded Prue, nearly pulling her off her feet with their enthusiasm and love.

“What’s all the—” Cole came to a dead stop in the doorway, nearly causing Alysha and Austin to slam into him as they were forced to stop short as well. The look on the former demon’s face suggested that he’d finally realized the full extent of what he’d gotten himself into by agreeing to live there.

Prue had to laugh as she bathed in the warmth of the family glow. “I think I’m going to have to add a few more rooms.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Ruditis has written numerous companion books and novels for TV shows like *Battlestar Galactica*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Star Trek, The Walking Dead*, and *The West Wing*. He has co-authored both of the official *Charmed* episode guides and has written several earlier *Charmed* novels, as well as the *New York Times* bestselling comic book series revealing the show's "unaired" ninth season.

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LET GORGONS BE GORGONS

Paul Ruditis

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CHAPTER 1

“I’m telling you, Phoebe. This is how the world ends. Not with a bang, but with a PR nightmare.” Mika Yoshida slumped back in the guest chair of Phoebe’s office, conceding defeat.

The publicist for *The Bay Mirror* wasn’t usually a drama queen. Phoebe tried to hear her out, even though it was becoming increasingly difficult to take the problem seriously. “I’ve been to the end of the world,” Phoebe said, only slightly joking. “It had very little to do with public relations.”

Mika glared at her. “You’re making fun of me.”

“I’m making fun of the *situation*,” Phoebe corrected. “I get that it’s your job to handle these things. You know how much I appreciate your work. Readership for *Ask Phoebe* doubled after you started here. But no, I don’t take what you’re saying right now very seriously.”

“*Five* couples.” Mika pounded her fist on Phoebe’s desk to punctuate the statement. “Five couples broke up in the past week--”

“Couples break up all the time. If it didn’t happen I wouldn’t have an advice column.”

Mika plowed on as if Phoebe hadn’t said anything. “And what did these five couples have in common? They were all married in a ceremony presided over by *The Bay Mirror*’s resident expert on love. The headlines practically write themselves. Our competitors are going to have a field day.”

“Which is precisely why I never should have agreed to that photo op in the first place. Who gets married in a mass wedding officiated by a newspaper columnist ordained over the internet?” Phoebe rifled through her

desk in search of a pencil. She didn't write anything out longhand, but she'd developed an annoying habit of chewing on one while she wrote. Phoebe went through two boxes of pencils while working on her book.

"The Church of Love and Light is a well-respected non-denominational organization." Mika could barely keep her face straight.

Phoebe pulled out a relatively fresh pencil with barely any teeth marks. "It was forever ago. I'm surprised these marriages lasted as long as they have, to be honest. I wouldn't have given half of them a week. The better question is why are you stalking these couples in the first place?"

"I wanted to do a follow up story. A kind of 'where are they now?' article showing how you've inspired their happy marriages. I didn't realize that inspiration had an expiration date."

Phoebe placed the pencil behind her ear. She didn't have time for this. She'd been so busy with the girls and the ghouls lately that she'd gotten behind in her work. Elise still had some stockpiled articles she kept on hand in case of magical distractions, but Phoebe needed to get ahead of future issues. The stack of letters on her desk was practically demanding to be read. And that was nothing compared to the additional piles in the mailroom.

Phoebe got up and politely—though not so subtly—helped Mika out of the guest seat. "It is a little weird that they all decided to file for divorce this week," she conceded. "But, I wouldn't call it a PR nightmare yet."

"In the *making*," Mika insisted. "I said it has the *potential* to be a PR nightmare. It's my job to stay on top of these things."

Phoebe led her to the door. "And you're really good at your job. Now that you've alerted me to the issue, I'll keep an ear out for any other breakups. Maybe some of these people have written in about their problems and I can do my own follow up in the column exploring the challenges of maintaining a marriage."

Mika's eyes lit up. "I can spin that."

"I have no doubt." Phoebe gave Mika a gentle push out of her office. "Now go head off some other PR emergency. I hear the new sports reporter has some questionable thoughts on women as professional athletes."

Mika sighed. "You joke, but that's why Elise had to fire the last sports reporter."

Phoebe watched her friend walk off with newfound determination. She didn't envy the publicist's job. Mika took the paper's failures personally. It got worse every time someone posted an article online about how newspapers were a dying industry. It was almost like she felt it was solely her responsibility to keep *The Bay Mirror* in business. Ever since Phoebe's advice column to the lovelorn had become one of the most popular sections of the paper, Mika went into overdrive when anything happened to threaten it. Thankfully, Elise usually kept her in check.

The Bay Mirror's editor-in-chief was fairly mellow about the newspaper business. Elise Rothman had seen so much in her career that she used to claim that she was prepared for anything, no matter how bizarre. Back then, Elise never anticipated just how unprepared she was to discover the secret that Phoebe had been keeping from her for years: that she and her sisters were witches. Elise recovered from the shock quickly—the circumstances had demanded it—but it was a memorable milestone in their relationship. It was also the last time Elise had ever mentioned that she was prepared for anything.

Phoebe was about to start on her pile of letters when an outburst of laughter caught her attention. Normally, she was able to ignore the typical commotion from the bullpen. Reporters were always calling attention to themselves reacting to something or other. But this time, the noise piqued Phoebe's interest when she saw a familiar freelance photojournalist leaning against the desk of the paper's political reporter.

Phoebe had noticed a love connection forming between Rachel and Jal weeks ago while the pair was looking over photo selects for one of his articles. As the paper's resident love expert, Phoebe had made it a personal mission to nurture that budding relationship. A small part of her knew she should just let nature take its course, but her meddlesome tendencies proved a louder voice in her head.

The potential pair was hunched over something so funny that it clearly warranted further attention. Phoebe dropped her pencil on the desk and went out to join them, putting off the stack of letters just a bit longer. "What's so funny?"

"This!" Jal held out Rachel's digital camera. His body was shaking so hard with laughter it was impossible to make out the image on the screen.

Phoebe leaned in. "What is it? I can't tell."

"Let me." Rachel grabbed her camera and Phoebe felt a jolt of pleasant emotion as the pair's hands touched. Even someone who wasn't an empath would have noticed it. Rachel and Jal were clearly on their way to coupledom on their own, without any help from Phoebe.

Rachel held out the camera. "Does this statue look familiar?"

Now that the screen was still, Phoebe could finally make out the image. The stone carving of a man in a suit appeared to be the Presidio. She could see the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. "It looks like … Congressman Ward?"

"The likeness is uncanny," Rachel said.

"It's the expression on his face that sells it," Jal said through the laughter as Rachel joined back in. "Like he has a permanent stick up his butt. I want to go down there and leave birdseed all over it so the pigeons can go to town."

Phoebe didn't share in their amusement. Years of experience with the supernatural raised her warning level without the need for a premonition.

Random statues of living politicians didn’t often turn up in parks on their own. Phoebe held out a hand, hoping to determine if her suspicions were justified. “Can I get a closer look?”

“Sure.” Rachel handed over the camera while suppressing a last few giggles.

Phoebe enlarged the image on the screen. They were right. It looked exactly like Ward, at least the photos Phoebe had seen of the man. The statue even matched his usual dour expression, but with just the barest hint of what could be surprise in the eyes. That little bit of shock added to Phoebe’s concern. She had to be absolutely sure.

Phoebe concentrated on the image, forcing herself to see beyond the picture, beyond the pixels. The world around her faded and suddenly she was in the congressman’s California office, at least, in her mind.

It was nighttime. Late. The congressman’s staff was long gone. Ward sat at his desk, dressed as if it was still the workday. He hadn’t even loosened his tie. That was no surprise. Ward wasn’t the casual type in his personality or his politics. If he had his way, no one in the country would be casual about anything. The congressman was preoccupied with drafting laws to ensure the public had no right to do anything. Phoebe was surprised that a progressive city like San Francisco had elected such a closed-minded politician, but she reminded herself that his district was actually outside of town in one of the more cloistered areas.

In her vision, Phoebe saw the congressman stand to greet someone entering his office. She wished she could see through his eyes to know who it was, but she couldn’t control that aspect of her vision. It was still unusual for her not to see more. The visitor may have been using some kind of cloaking spell to keep prying eyes from getting a full picture. Phoebe concentrated, but the vision remained incomplete.

The congressman did not come out from behind his desk, keeping it between himself and his seemingly unexpected visitor. There was no offer of a warm greeting to whomever had come in. Ward wasn't overtly angry about the late-night intrusion, more like mildly annoyed. The practiced veil of the politician couldn't hide his true feelings, but he tried to adopt a fake smile to cover his displeasure. Couldn't risk offending a potential voter in the next election. Phoebe's vision didn't include sound, so she wasn't privy to the conversation, but it seemed innocuous enough.

The sudden change caught Phoebe by surprise, just as it did the congressman. One moment, Ward was speaking and the next he was frozen in stone. He barely had time to react. Only that barest hint of surprise registered in his granite eyes.

Phoebe came out of the vision to find Rachel and Jal staring at her. She was used to this. It happened from time to time. Her coworkers didn't know she'd just had a vision of the past. From their perspective, Phoebe tensed up and then zoned out. Depending on how long she'd been in the vision, they might have feared she'd had some kind of stroke.

Phoebe laughed, hoping to break the tension as she handed the camera back to Rachel. "Perfect likeness. He should find a way to use it in his next campaign."

Jal turned to his computer and brought up his contact list. "I'm going to see if I can get a statement out of the congressman's office. Nobody seems to know where the statue came from or why it's in the middle of the Presidio."

"Maybe I can get a shot of the congressman standing beside it," Rachel suggested, placing a hand on his shoulder. "We can ask readers to see if they can tell the real from the fake."

"Better hurry," Jal said. "The groundskeepers will probably be carting it away soon."

Phoebe backed away from Jal’s desk. “I just remembered the girls have a doctor’s appointment this morning. If Elise is looking for me, tell her I’ll be back later.”

Phoebe didn’t wait for the pair to respond before heading out. She tapped her phone awake as she left the bullpen and pressed Paige’s name while waiting for the elevator. If Paige was free, she could orb into the building, grab Phoebe, and get them both to Piper’s before the elevator reached the first floor. The doors opened the same moment Paige answered the call.

“Tell me your kids are in daycare at Magic School today,” Phoebe said as she stepped into the elevator.

“They are,” Paige replied. “I’m supposed to meet a new Charge in an hour. I’m guessing my plans just changed?”

“That would be a safe bet,” Phoebe said. “Come get me. I’m in the elevator at work.”

“On my way.”

Phoebe ended the call as the familiar white/blue orbs began to collect at the top of the elevator. Having a sister that could teleport at a moment’s notice had its perks. It wouldn’t be long before they knew what kind of danger the day held in store for them. It seemed unlikely that Phoebe would be getting to that stack of letters anytime soon.

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